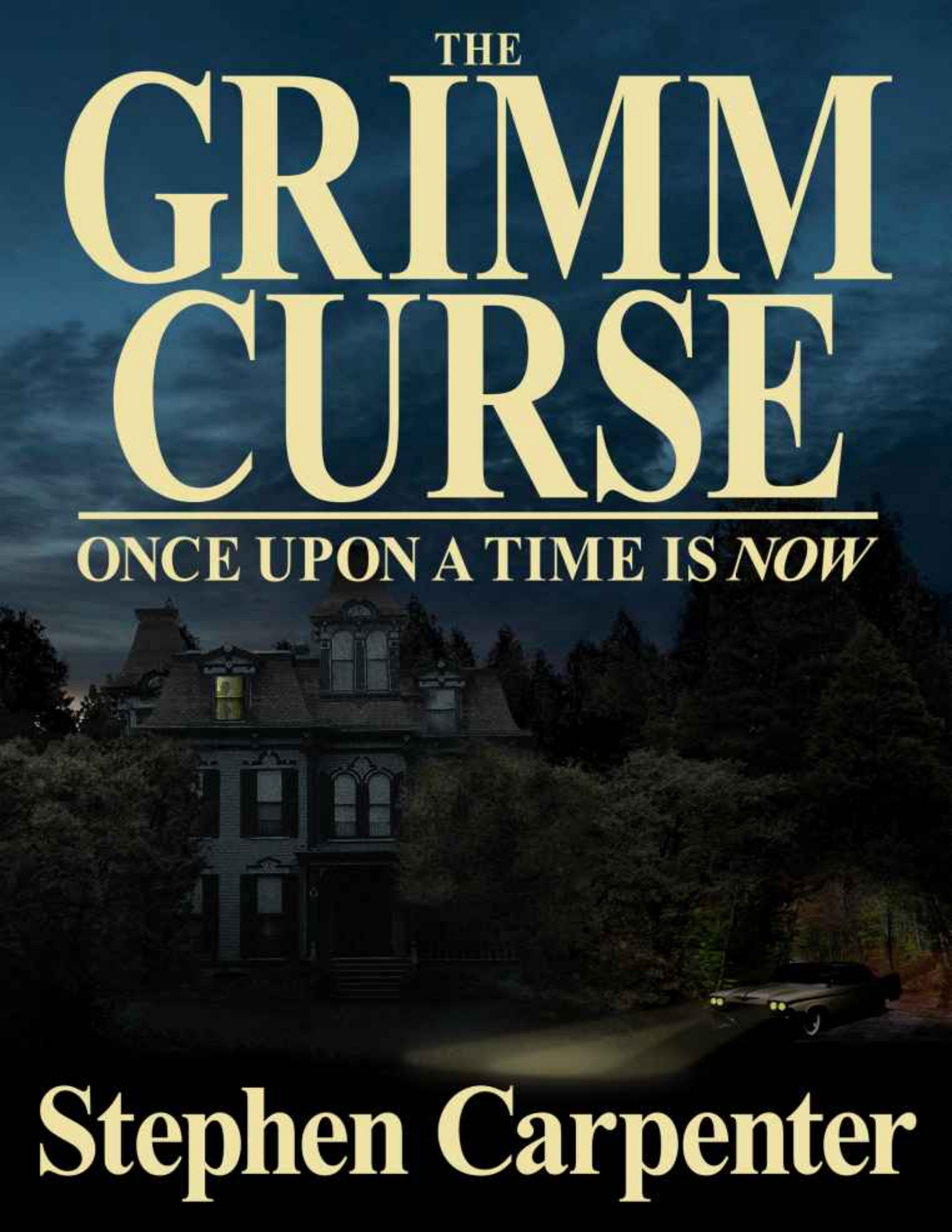
THE
GRIMM
CURSE
ONCE UPON A TIME IS NOW
Stephen Carpenter

THE GRIMM CURSE
Once Upon A Time Is Now

By
Stephen Carpenter

For Cameron

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WARNING

If you're the kind of person who thinks that "fairy tales" are sweet, fun little stories for little kids, this book isn't for you.

If you think that big bad wolves, evil stepmothers, and witches aren't really real, then you're in the wrong section of the store, my friend. Go search somewhere else. I recommend the Children's section. Because this book is about bad stuff—really bad stuff that happens to real people. This book is about evil.

There's nothing wrong with wanting to ignore the kind of evil I'm talking about. I used to be that way and believe me, ignorance is bliss.

Well, it wasn't really bliss for me. Actually, I had a pretty crappy life before all of this stuff started happening to me, almost a year ago, around my fifteenth birthday. I had lousy parents, who turned out not to be my parents at all. I was an "at risk" kid—that's a laugh—if they thought I was "at risk" before, they should have seen the kind of night I had last week, fighting a Gorgon with only a mirror, a Vow of Initiation (which didn't work), and a friend, who is in the hospital as I'm telling you this. *That's* risk.

But before we get into all of that, I just wanted to warn you first. Because if you think that the words "Once upon a time" mean that the story happened a long time ago and so it never really happened, I've got news for you.

Once upon a time is *now*.

CHAPTER ONE

My Grimm Life

My name is Jake Grimm, and I am a direct descendant of the Brothers Grimm, who wrote the Grimm Fairy Tales. Actually, the brothers didn't so much *write* the stories as write them *down*. The brothers went around collecting folk tales in Germany in the early 1800's; they heard stories from peasants, gypsies, their own servants, as well as some not-so-nice people from the German aristocracy. Then the brothers published the tales and became rich and famous. But there was a price to be paid for their fame and fortune—a price I am paying to this day. For example, I am typing this with one hand. What happened to my other hand? Don't ask. You'll find out soon enough.

I didn't know I was a Grimm when I was a little kid. I thought my name was Cruise Crubbel. I swear, I am not making this up. What kind of person would make up a name like that? My foster mother, that's who. She was a big fan of Tom Cruise. And my foster father's last name was Crubbel, so these two geniuses are responsible for that casserole of stupidity they called a name. They might as well have hung a sign around my neck that said KICK THE CRAP OUT OF ME ALL OF THE TIME.

So I went through grade school and half of middle school with that messed-up name. Can you believe that? I no longer go by that name, for the obvious reason that it's idiotic. And it's not my real name, anyway. The worst part about that stupid name was that it provoked a lot of fights with other kids—one fight in particular which had serious consequences. So, for the purposes of this story, you will never hear the name Cruise Crubbel again. It is the Name

That Shall Not Be Spoken. I am Jake Grimm, and I will never be anything else. If you need to know more about Tom Cruise, you and I have nothing in common. Go watch TMZ.

I found out that my real name was Jacob Grimm when I was thirteen. My foster mother, Heather, and my foster father, Gerald, were arguing about money, as usual. Whenever they drank, they argued about money. And they drank a lot—especially Gerald. Really, the less said about Heather and Gerald the better. To tell you the truth, I was terribly ashamed of them, which is a sorry situation for a kid. But I'll tell you enough to give you the basic idea, and I'll tell it quickly because it's boring.

Heather was forty-five and she dressed like a teenager. She had dyed her hair blonde so many times it was a traffic-light yellow color, and thin and brittle, like the straw in an old broom. She worked as a stylist at a ratty hair salon in a strip mall on Van Nuys Boulevard, near the apartment where we lived, in Los Angeles. It wasn't a big important job, but at least she *had* a job.

Gerald, to the best of my recollection, never had a job in the nine years I lived with him and Heather. Gerald was bald and fat and had skinny arms and hairy shoulders. He called himself "self-employed," but the reality was that Gerald sat around the apartment all day, drinking beer and gambling on poker and blackjack online. But on the fifteenth day of each month, Gerald would sober up, put some clothes on, and leave for the day. He would come back late, his face angry—and sunburned if he had been to the horse track—his breath reeking of beer. Then he and Heather would argue. It would go something like this:

Heather: "Did you go to the track?"

Gerald: (muttering something).

Heather: "Where's the check from County?"

Gerald: (grunting sound).

Heather: “You couldn’t even wait one day to go gamble with that check, could you? That’s *not* what that money’s for, *Gerald*…”

And so on. It was excruciatingly boring to hear every month. But as I got older, I grew more and more curious about this monthly “check from County.” Heather always lowered her voice when she talked about it, which only made me more curious. What *was* this mysterious check? Gerald didn’t have a job, and Heather kept her own paychecks away from him.

So one night, at the age of thirteen, on the fifteenth of October, I slipped out of bed just before midnight—after Heather and Gerald had passed out—and I started sorting through the mess of papers on Gerald’s “desk,” which was actually just a sad little card table. I found a ripped-open envelope with the Los Angeles County seal on the outside, and inside I found a check stub—the part of the check you’re supposed to keep for your records. The check was for $841 dollars and payable to Gerald Crubbel. At the bottom it said “Los Angeles County Dept. of Child Services.” And at the very bottom of the stub was a long series of numbers, followed by some odd-looking characters that I recognized as computer code.

How would a thirteen year-old who didn’t have a computer recognize computer code? My friend Mike Wong had shown me. I use the term “friend” loosely, because neither Mike or I had any real friends. Mike was painfully shy, and I’m fairly certain he was a genius. Both of his parents were software engineers with some big company, and Mike had access to the most awesome computer you could imagine, right in his house, with an insanely fast internet connection. Mike lived down the street from me, and as we passed his house on the way home from school, he would get a gleam in his eye and say, “Want to do some hacking?” And then we would go to his house and Mike would zip around online, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

We never did anything you could really call “hacking.” We just liked calling it that because it sounded cooler than what it really was—a couple of kids fooling around on a fancy computer. The worst thing we ever did was break into the school’s lame data system and find out what the other kids’ grades were. But Mike had shown me about source code, so I took the check stub and settled in at Gerald’s crappy laptop and started a little hacking of my own.

By noon the next day, on a sunny Sunday, October sixteenth, while Gerald and Heather slept off the booze, I discovered that I had been adopted at the age of four, and that my real name was Jacob Grimm.

You’d think that kind of revelation would be upsetting to a thirteen year-old. But I wasn’t upset at all.

I was relieved.

CHAPTER TWO

Grimmer and Grimmer

I didn’t know at the age of thirteen that I was a descendent of *the* Grimm family. I just knew I wasn’t Cruise Crubbel (whoops—FORGET that I mentioned that name). The main thing was, I knew then that I wasn’t related to Heather and Gerald, and that made me feel just great. For the rest of my thirteenth year, I felt like a painful splinter had been removed from deep under my skin. Some itch had been scratched. Some answer to a question I had never really understood had been given. I’d always had a weird feeling that I didn’t belong in Van Nuys with Heather and Gerald, but I had no idea where *else* I might belong. The news that I wasn’t really their child gave me hope for an answer to that question.

But the next year, when I turned fourteen and began the eighth grade, that’s when the trouble started. That’s when I became *at risk.*

It started with the book—The Complete Grimm’s Fairy Stories—which I found in the middle school’s pathetic library. Like I said, I didn’t know back then that I was one of *those* Grimm’s, but I didn’t know anyone else with that name, so I was curious. I checked the book out and read every story—all 211 of them—in the two weeks I was allowed the book. Then I checked it out again and read them all again. I read some of them more than once, more than twice, more than three times…Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, Rumpelstiltskin... I was fascinated with them. I would even go online, after Gerald was asleep, and read articles and reviews and papers about the famous stories.

It was all new to me. Heather and Gerald didn’t read me any bedtime stories as a kid. Gerald once let me look at a racing form

until I fell asleep. That's about as close as I ever came to being "read to sleep." So the big book of Grimm's Fairy Stories was my first real encounter with the tales that most kids grow up knowing by heart.

I wound up checking out "The Complete Grimm's Fairy Stories" so many times that the school librarian said I couldn't check it out again. This seemed so outrageously stupid and unfair that I stole the book from the school library. I know stealing is wrong, but c'mon. A librarian forbidding a student from checking out a book? A *librarian?* This, by the way, is the same librarian who came up with the library's slogan: *Give a hoot—read a book!*

She is The Librarian Who Shall Remain Nameless. What a jerk.

Anyway, they caught me with the book one day during study hall, and I got in trouble. By that time my grades had been slipping for a while—I was spending all of my time studying the Grimm stories. I couldn't have cared less about my grades, which is not an approach to school that I recommend. Everybody started coming down on me, hard. Heather, my teachers, Gerald, and, after one particularly bad day, the County of Los Angeles.

L.A. County. Talk about jerks. A *parade* of jerks.

The final straw broke when Skip Jergen and I had a fight. It wasn't really a fight at all. Here's what happened: Skip Jergen was bigger than all of the other eighth graders. He had really short blonde hair—so short he almost looked bald—and he wore the same black leather jacket every day, even if it was a hundred degrees. Skip was the kind of person who could sense what made you mad, or afraid, or upset, and then he would grind down on that thing until you ran off crying or moved to the other side of the hall when he passed. And Skip, you could tell, *liked* that. He had cold blue eyes and a cruel mouth that curled up in a smile whenever he was taunting or tormenting someone.

Skip had tried on a few occasions to taunt me; about my height (I was tall for my age, but skinny), about the fact that I had no friends, about my clothes, or my hair, or the fact that I was always carrying a book about "fairies." None of it got to me. I couldn't care less about Skip Jergen.

But then one day, in gym class, Skip started in on me about my name. It went like this:

Skip: "Hey Cruiseee, wanna go cruisin'?"

Me: ignoring him.

Skip: "Hey Cruise, why don't you and me cruuuise up some chicks? Or how about some *fairies?*"

Here's what I was thinking: if you're going to insult someone, at least be *creative* about it. But Skip wasn't creative. He was as dumb as a bag of hair, and he could see his taunting was getting to me. I felt the back of my neck turn hot, and then Skip turned up the heat. He got in my face and started saying, "Why don't ya cruise on outta here? Take a cruise to planet gay, Cruiser…"

I don't know exactly what came over me, but I turned and looked right in his face and said, "Hey, Skip-rope, why don't you shut your Skippie peanut butter cup hole? In fact, why don't you do us all a favor and skip right on down to hell, Skip-for-brains."

You could tell from the look on Skip's face that no kid had ever talked to him that way before. He had no idea what to say, so he pushed me. I knew the push was coming, so I had put my right foot behind me for balance, and then I did something that surprised both Skip *and* me.

I pushed back.

Skip was so surprised that he fell right over and the back of his head banged on the gym floor. Then, to the great surprise of the group of boys who had crowded around us, Skip Jergen began to cry. The gym coach came over and helped Skip to his feet. Skip

was whimpering and holding the back of his head. When he took his hand away, I saw a drop of blood on his fingers.

The instant I saw the blood I knew I was in a world of crap. In that instant, I had gone from being an ignored underachiever and had officially become a *Big Problem*.

CHAPTER THREE

I Am Diagnosed As Totally Mental And I Run Away From Home

The jerk parade blossomed into a full-on, three-ring jerk *circus*. I saw counselors, shrinks, a "community relations" cop, and a friend of Heather's who had a "degree" in "spiritual psychology" from Groovy University in Santa Monica (that's not the real name—frankly, I just can't bring my one good hand to type the real name of that so-called university). I was diagnosed as having ADD, ADHD, Adolescent Antisocial Disorder, Borderline Transient Sociopathic Tendencies, and Heather's groovy friend said there was a "dark energy" in my aura. I told her to shove my dark energy up *her* aura. I got in trouble with Heather and Gerald for telling her that, but I had heard enough crap from jerks. Besides, it shut her up.

I was "individuating." I was "thinking independently and acting out."

I was nearly puking, is what I was doing. I had pushed a bully who needed pushing more than just about anyone I've ever seen—except for the vicious, inhuman creatures you're about to meet.

The one good thing that came out of this mess was that I found out I was a genius—sort of. I was sitting in the exam room of one of the counselors and I snuck a look at my file while I was waiting. Turns out I have eleventy-billion mental and emotional "problems" but I also have an IQ of 152. I guess the only thing scarier than a "troubled" adolescent is a troubled adolescent who's smarter than all of the adults who are supposed to know how to handle a kid like me.

Anyway, they gave me all kinds of tests. Then they gave me lectures and pills. I never took any of them, to belly or to heart.

Bottom line, I got kicked out of school and I was supposed to go to a new school—a "special" school for "adolescents with behavior issues," but I decided *screw that.*

So, to bring this sorry chapter to a close, just after dawn, on the first morning Heather dropped me off at "special" school, I waited until her banged-up Corolla turned the corner, and then I crossed the street to a bus stop. I couldn't have cared less where the next bus was headed, but I was gonna get on it. I was *gone*.

And this is where it gets weird. There was a homeless guy sleeping on the bus stop bench, an empty bottle of something in his hand. He was filthy and he stank worse than Gerald after a day at the track. *Loser smell,* I thought.

But that random, ragged old dude changed my whole life with three words. That's how quickly your life can turn: three words were spoken to me by some drunk I had never seen before, and would never see again, and suddenly everything changed.

"Come home, Jacob."

I had been staring at the special school, which looked like a prison. I was feeling very happy I would never set foot in there when I heard the old man's voice speaking my name. I turned and saw that the filthy old guy was sitting straight up, his watery red eyes staring at me, like he was looking right into my soul.

"Come home, Jacob!" he shouted fiercely, gobs of spit spewing from his crusty mouth.

It was weird enough to hear him yelling my name and looking right through me, but the *really* weird part was the sound of his voice. It's hard to explain, but the voice didn't seem to be coming from him. His lips were moving, saying the words, but the voice seemed to be coming from *inside* my head. All other sounds—traffic, people passing by—all of it went away and the only thing I could hear was that voice in my head. Like I was wearing earbuds, with an iPod playing the "crazy" playlist. It sent a shiver through

my whole body—not a shiver, actually…more of a small earthquake. Time seemed to stop, and for a second I thought I was losing it. Maybe I really *was* mental. Then the bottle rolled off the old guy's lap and shattered on the concrete, and the sounds from the real world came rushing back and the old man flopped back down on the bench and started snoring again.

Before I could think another thought, a bus rolled up with the words "Downtown - Union Station" on its electronic destination sign. The bus stopped and the driver opened the door and looked right at me. I looked back at the snoring homeless guy, then got on the bus and paid my fare and found a seat near the back. I looked back at the bus stop as we pulled into traffic and the crusty old guy was gone.

On the bus ride, I had a long time to think about what had just happened. It takes two hours to reach Union Station from Van Nuys. But once the bus pulled up to the train station downtown I had figured out a couple of things. First, that I wasn't crazy. I don't think crazy people worry about being crazy, or even *know* that they're crazy. Something had actually happened—something that defied logic, and was not just some weird coincidence. The whole thing had a special feeling. It *meant* something. This was the first of many times I would hear or see things that I couldn't possibly have heard or seen, as you're about to find out.

That morning, though, I just sat in the back of the bus, staring out my window at the grimy city dragging by, the words *Come home, Jacob* still echoing in my ears. I didn't know then who had *really* spoken them—all I knew is the words were spoken directly to *me*, and somehow I knew, deep inside, that I was expected to listen, and to follow.

The second thing I figured out during that two-hour bus ride was that the words "come home" did *not* mean "return to the apartment in Van Nuys." I knew from hacking into my adoption

records that I was born in a place called Woodland, Oregon. So when I got to Union Station I found a map of Oregon tucked into a slot in the middle of a long row of maps by the ticket window, and I searched for Woodland. It took a while to find the tiny little dot in the middle of nowhere, almost exactly in the middle of the map. The nearest town of any size was Medford, Oregon.

I looked up at the train schedule and saw that a train to Portland was leaving in six hours and, after transferring a few times, I figured I could be in Medford in a couple of days. So I went to the ATM machine near the ticket window, took out Heather's ATM card, and proceeded to withdraw all of the cash I could: $900 bucks in three whacks of $300—three thick wads of twenties, which I crammed into my wallet and shoved into my back pocket. I had lifted Heather's ATM card earlier that morning, before Heather and Gerald were awake. I may have been only fourteen, and just about to turn fifteen, but I wasn't stupid. I knew I would need money—as much as I could get—if I was really going to run away successfully. I also knew Heather's PIN number by heart, from all of the times she had withdrawn money with me standing there with her. Heather would huddle close to the machine, making sure no one could see her enter her PIN number and steal her vast fortune, but she never hid the keyboard from me. I suppose technically this was still stealing, but I justified it because I figured Heather and Gerald had made plenty of money off me by collecting all of those county checks for all of those years—tens of thousands of dollars that Gerald had pissed away at the track, or online poker games. I had pretty much wiped out Heather's checking account, but, knowing Gerald, he would make sure they kept those checks coming long after I was gone.

I spent most of the $900 buying my tickets and transfers, then sat down by the ramp to the boarding area and waited for my train.

Come home, Jacob.

*

What I didn’t know then was that, at the very moment I heard those words, my great uncle Eustace, my last remaining *real* relative, was being tormented to death by a witch. I know this because I saw it in a vision, much later. I’m going to share this vision with you now, just to give you a taste of what I was about to face. When I first had the vision, it was like a dream—like I was living it, right there in the room with my great uncle on that fateful night. Now, as I write this, it’s like a movie I saw a long time ago, but remains burned in my memory forever.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Death Of Eustace – A Vision

Eustace Grimm, my great-uncle, is sitting at his dining room table, writing a letter. Eustace is ninety-one years old—a serious-looking man with deep lines of wisdom and worry on his weathered face. Eustace looks very dignified, wearing a heavy cardigan sweater and gold-rimmed glasses. But Eustace is not a well man. He has a heart condition that has weakened him and worn him down for years. His skin is pale and his hands tremble as he writes.

Beyond the dining room, through the dark old house, I can see the parlor, which is a cluttered museum of fairy tale objects. Drawings of witches and elves and other creatures cover the faded flocked wallpaper. Rows and rows of shelves are filled with books and curious items: a large stuffed owl, an ancient wooden flute, a gnarled walking stick, a single glass slipper, a crystal ball…

If you look closely you'll see that Eustace is writing backwards. *And though his hands tremble, they don't hesitate. He writes backwards expertly, with a practiced hand.*

Eustace pauses; the effort of writing has exhausted him. Then he turns back to the letter and finishes it. As Eustace signs his name, his hands begin to tremble more. Then, as he folds the letter into an envelope and seals it with an ornate wax seal, his hands begin to shake uncontrollably. Eustace grimaces in pain and clutches his chest, but manages to reach back, behind him, to place the letter on a hutch. But the pain overwhelms him and he drops the letter, which falls behind the hutch.

Eustace grabs a low shelf on the hutch to support himself, then reaches up to a top shelf for a bottle of prescription pills…

But before Eustace can reach them, a small snake curls around the yellow prescription bottle and snatches it away.

Eustace turns and sees, across the parlor, a shadowy Figure in the darkness. The Figure moves across the room, staying in shadow, but occasionally silhouetted against the windows, which are glowing faintly blue with the pre-dawn light. The Figure appears female, with eyes that glow green from the shadows. She is a witch, and when she speaks, her voice is female, but more like a growl than a human voice.

"Looking for these, Eustace?" she says.

The tiny snake that snatched the pills hovers above Eustace, taunting him, at the witch's command. Eustace reaches up for the pills, but the snake rises, keeping the pills just out of reach.

"Jump," the witch says.

Eustace tries to lift himself to his feet, but falls to his knees, gasping for breath, his hands clutched to his chest, his face contorted with blinding pain.

"We've waited a long time for this," the witch says.

Eustace looks past the witch. Outside, through the large, arched window in the parlor, he can see eyes*…dozens of them…glowing in the eerie pre-dawn half-light, moving closer, watching…eyes that belong to creatures—creatures whose features become more clear as they cautiously approach the house. Some are large, hulking forms, some are small, elfin forms, and they are all dominated by a massive Thing that has to lean down to peer with its one eye into the parlor. Swarming all around these beings are hundreds of tiny glowing eyes the size of firefly tails, chattering excitedly in squealing little whispers as they buzz brazenly closer and closer to the windows of the parlor.*

The witch's eyes glow down at Eustace, who is crawling toward the pantry. She glides closer, wary of Eustace but taunting him from the shadowy parlor.

“I gotta say, I’m disappointed,” the witch growls. “I always pictured you going out in a blaze of glory, the noble warrior, fighting with his last ounce of whatever. But this is pathetic.”

Eustace ignores her, crawling closer to the pantry. The witch glides closer.

“Pathetic,” the witch says. “Crawling on the floor. You just don’t have the same zip you used to have. I’d feel sorry for you if I weren’t so BORED.” Her voice booms out, suddenly loud enough to rattle the rafters.

“C’mon,” she growls, impatient. “Die so I can go eat.”

Eustace manages to reach the pantry and open the door and reach for an ornate hand mirror inside. He turns the mirror toward the witch and she flinches, hissing, and backs away into the shadows where she can’t be seen at all.

Suddenly, a large snake shoots out from the darkness and whips around Eustace’s frail body. The snake raises Eustace up to the ceiling, then throws him to the floor. Eustace lies on his back, fighting to breathe. He looks over at the glowing eyes of the witch, deep in the shadows of the parlor.

“You’ll burn yet,” Eustace says.

“Not on your watch,” the witch replies.

Eustace makes one last, wrenching effort to move toward the hand mirror, but he stops, shudders, then falls back to the floor.

“Jacob,” he whispers, barely audible. “Come home.”

Eustace turns and looks out of the dining room window. He can see the swelling pink glow in the eastern sky—the sun is about to rise.

“Come home, Jacob!” he cries out.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” the witch says. “Just die already.”

Eustace lies back, closes his eyes, and becomes still. The rise and fall of his breathing stops.

The witch turns toward the creatures watching from the parlor window.

“Ding-dong, the Huntsman’s dead!” she cries out in a sing-song voice, and the shadowy creatures scatter in the half-light, in every direction, to the four winds.

Then the witch retreats soundlessly into the shadows and is gone.

BEFORE WE GET TO CHAPTER FIVE
An Explanation Of The Telling Of The First Tale

What follows is a recounting of the events that began when I arrived in Woodland on that first day. I have decided to write everything down for two reasons:

1) The only chance I have to survive is by keeping a detailed log of all of my experiences—knowledge is power.

2) If I *don't* survive, these journals will be the only guide for the next poor soul who has to pick up the sword that was thrust into my hands.

Some of the things you are about to read are things I experienced directly. Some events have been pieced together from witness reports, lots of investigation, "reasoned speculation," as the police would say, and more than a little magic.

But it all began when I reached Woodland.

CHAPTER FIVE

I Reach Woodland And Nearly Get Run Over By A Witch In A Range Rover

It was a lot easier to travel the 622 miles from Los Angeles to Medford, Oregon than it was to travel the final 160 miles from Medford to Woodland. That last leg of the journey took two full days. At the train station in Medford I found a bus that could take me as far as Beedleton, a tiny logging town halfway between Medford and Woodland. But there was no bus from Beedleton to Woodland. I did find a taxi at the Beedleton bus station—a beat-up old Chevy, driven by a guy who looked like a troll. But when I told the taxi troll I wanted a ride to Woodland he turned and stared at me like I was crazy. He didn't say a word, just shook his head, rolled up his window, and drove off in a hurry.

Finally, after spending the night curled up in a bench at the bus station, I caught a ride the next morning with a logger—a burly, bearded guy who was willing to detour through Woodland on his way to a lumber mill in Lone Pine, across the state. I paid him $30 bucks, the last of Heather's $900, and we rode in silence through the dense forest that seemed endless. As I rode along in the logging truck, I thought about my situation: I had no idea what I would do for money, now that my last dollar was spent. I didn't know anyone or any*thing* about Woodland, and no one else seemed to have anything to say about it, either. I had one change of clothes in my backpack and I had finished my last meal—a Power bar—the night before, curled up on the bus station bench. I was beginning to wonder if I had made a very big mistake by running off the way I did, when the truck crested a hill and the town where I was born spread before me.

Woodland.

I had two very different feelings when I first saw the little town nestled deep in the woods. First, it was a weird feeling, knowing that I had been born in this place but not recognizing anything about it at all. I was four when I was sent away.

But the other feeling was completely different, and harder to explain. Even though it was an unfamiliar place, there was *something* familiar about it—Heather's groovy friend would have said I was having a very powerful *déjà vu.* All I know is, the moment I saw the little town I suddenly didn't feel alone or uncertain about running away anymore. It was like something had clicked into place and I was right where I was supposed to be. You would think that would be a comforting feeling, but it wasn't. Along with the sense of belonging came a sense of something inevitable that was *not* good—something bad that was bound to happen, *going* to happen, no matter what I did. How messed up is it when you feel like you belong in a place that fills you with a sense of dread?

We rolled up to a weathered wooden sign that read "WELCOME TO WOODLAND." Suddenly, the logger hit the air brakes. He stopped the truck, staring ahead, silent. I was about to say something when he spoke for the first time on the whole drive.

"Far as I go, kid," he said, staring ahead at the town.

"Okay," I said, and gathered up my backpack and opened my door. "Thanks."

I got out and started walking into town as the logger turned the truck around on a fire road and headed back to the highway that led to Lone Pine.

Woodland was a blend of old and new. I walked past a suburban neighborhood that could have been anywhere, USA—nice, regular-looking modern homes with neat lawns. But then I would turn a corner and there would be a two hundred year-old Gothic building

with huge, arched windows and turrets and gargoyles poised at the edge of the roof. The whole place felt like the collision point between the 19th century and the 21st.

It only took me about twenty minutes to reach the town square, which had a large bandstand in the center lawn, and was surrounded by stores and shops and small office buildings, some new and some very old; some were both at the same time—like the creepy red brick library that looked like something from an old west ghost town, but had a Starbucks built into the front.

I went into the library and walked around through the musty shelves of books until I found the reference section. I found a Woodland phone directory, which was barely a quarter of an inch thick, and looked up the name "Grimm." There was only one listing: "E. Grimm, 742 Wroughtwood Place." I took the phone book over to the reference desk and showed the address to the librarian, an ancient woman with a thick plaid shawl over her narrow shoulders.

"Excuse me," I said, and showed her the address. "Can you tell me how to get to this address?"

She adjusted her rimless spectacles and looked down at the listing. Then she peered over her glasses at me.

"The Grimm house?" she asked, her eyebrows arching up. "Why do you want to be going there?"

My first thought was *that's none of your business*. What was it about me that librarians didn't like?

"I just…would like to know, that's all," I said.

"And who might you be?" she said.

"I'm, ah, a friend of the family," I replied.

"Oh," she said. "I see." This seemed to make sense to her, so she drew a quick little map and handed it to me with an odd look. I thanked her and turned to go.

“My condolences,” she said, looking at me curiously.

What does that *mean?* I though to myself. But I just nodded and headed for the door with the little map in my hand. Just before I walked out, I noticed a flyer on a bulletin board by the door. At the top of the flyer was the word “MISSING” in big, bold letters. Underneath were two photographs, a boy and a girl, both sixteen. According to the flyer they were Beth and Gregory Peyton, twin brother and sister, last seen two days earlier. There were little tabs with a phone number on each one, hanging off at the bottom of the flyer. It sent a little shiver through me but I didn’t want to hang around there any longer. I turned away and headed out the door.

I walked out of the library and back onto the sidewalk. Autumn leaves skittered around ahead of me as a cool wind stirred up. I was staring at the map, not watching where I was going, as I stepped off of the curb to cross the street—

SCREECH! A white Range Rover skidded to a stop, inches from me. I looked up at the driver, a pretty blonde woman. She glared at me angrily at first, then, as I crossed in front of her, her eyes narrowed and followed me. She was still watching me as I turned the corner and walked out of her sight.

What I didn’t know then was that the pretty blonde woman was at least six centuries old, and she went by the human name of Rachel Eaton. And she was a witch.

She was, in fact, the witch who had tormented my great uncle Eustace as he lay dying. And I would meet her again, very, very soon.

CHAPTER SIX

Rachel Eaton

Rachel Eaton pulled her white Range Rover into the wide driveway that led to her sprawling modern home at the edge of Woodland, where the homes ended and the forest began. She got out of the Range Rover and opened the back and leaned in and grabbed three grocery bags that were stowed neatly there. She lifted a limber leg and closed the back door with her foot. She was dressed in her yoga gear—black tights and a white Spandex tank top—having just taught a yoga class that morning before stopping at the market. She headed up the walk toward the house, carrying the groceries. Rachel was lovely, with long, straight blonde hair, wide blue eyes, and perfect skin. She had the lean, willowy body and perfect, centered posture of a yogi, but as she entered her home, her mind was racing with dark, twisted thoughts.

The boy, the boy…he had the hatefulness in him. Could he be…?

Rachel forced the thoughts from her mind and closed the door with her foot, then crossed her spacious home to her enormous, gleaming, gourmet kitchen, and began unloading the groceries. The house was spectacular—ultra modern, with lots of open space, and enormous skylights everywhere that filled the house with sunlight and warmth, even on this chilly autumn day.

Rachel turned on the small flat-screen TV in the kitchen and listened to the news as she took out the groceries and began to prepare the feast.

Two hours later, Rachel opened the oven door and checked on a roasting rack of lamb. She closed the oven, then added a few

brushes of honey glaze to a glistening ham which was cooling on the counter. She opened a second oven door and basted a turkey inside, then lifted the gleaming copper lids on the cookware covering the stove. She checked on a casserole, then looked in on a pot full of steaming stuffing, then stirred another, larger pot with simmering seafood bisque, and yet another containing potatoes au gratin—enough rich food to feed a small platoon, and feed them well.

"This is channel six breaking news…" the sound from the TV made Rachel stop in mid-stir. She looked at the TV as the local news anchorman appeared on the screen. "An Amber alert has been issued for two local Woodland teens," the newsman said, as the photographs of Beth and Gregory Peyton appeared on the television.

"Beth and Gregory Peyton's parents alerted police Tuesday evening when the two Woodland High students never came home from school…"

Rachel snatched up the remote and turned the TV off, then opened the oven door, slipped on an oven mitt, and pulled out the roasting rack of lamb. She balanced it perfectly on one hand while picking up the glistening ham with the other, and walked out of the kitchen.

She walked across the living room, carrying the food past her floor-to-ceiling windows, to a doorway that opened to a broad staircase heading downstairs. She moved down the curving stairway, which seemed to go on forever. The smooth white walls became darker and mustier, until, finally, toward the bottom of the stairs, the smooth walls gave way to mossy, damp stone, hundreds of years old.

Rachel lifted her foot and pushed open the heavy oak door at the bottom of the stairs, then moved into the dark basement. Actually, "basement" is far too kind a word. It was more of a

dungeon—dark, with an uneven stone floor and stone walls, and a massive cast iron oven against one wall. The oven had been specially cast, over two hundred years ago, and built to Rachel's exacting specifications. The door alone was six feet wide and three feet tall. Rachel put the food down on a huge oak cutting table, then put on a pair of blacksmith's gloves and opened the oven door. Fire roared out from a massive blaze engulfing a quarter cord of firewood inside. Rachel left the door open and the firelight illuminated the dungeon. Against the far wall was an array of slaughtering tools: two heavy iron hooks hung from the ceiling, a chopping block sat squat in the between the hooks, planted in the stone floor, with an axe sticking up from it, its gleaming blade embedded in the scarred, stained, ancient wood.

In the center of the dungeon's stone floor was a well; a well that Rachel herself had dug, in 1889, with the help of a couple of friends—friends who were no longer with us—thank you very much, Eustace, may you rot in hell, you vile pig, *Rachel thought as she leaned over the well and looked down.*

No human eyes could see through the darkness at the bottom of that damp pit, but Rachel could see quite clearly.

"You haven't touched that delicious beef bourguignon I slaved over for you!" Rachel said, sweetly admonishing.

"Please…" came a girl's voice, echoing up from the darkness, faint with exhaustion and terror, from thirty feet below. "Please… we can't eat any more…please just let us go…" the girl's voice caught in her throat, and she lapsed into sobs.

"Picky, picky," Rachel said, wagging a finger at them. "Let me put it this way…"

And then Rachel's pretty blue eyes transformed into green, reptilian slits, and her perfect skin revealed mottled gray patches as she roared in a voice that bore no resemblance to the sweet voice she had used only a moment before:

“EAT OR DIE,” the Rachel/witch roared down the well, and the twins, a boy and girl, Beth and Gregory Peyton, screamed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Grimm House & The Breaking Of The Seal

The sun was just about to set as I reached Wroughtwood Place. If I had been riding in a car I would have missed the street sign, which was covered with the low branches of a huge tree. But on foot I was able to see the sign as I approached and the wind blew a few leaves off the tree to reveal it. I knew I was only a few moments from the "Grimm house," as the old librarian had called it.

Under the street sign was another sign—a yellow triangle that said DEAD END. I turned the corner and headed down the dead-end street. The funny thing about Wroughtwood Place was that there seemed to be no houses; the road was a little rougher than the neatly paved streets near the center of town—Wroughtwood Place was on the edge of town, backed right up to the forest. The road curved, and I couldn't see what was ahead until I was almost right up on it—the Grimm house—the only house on the street, at the end of the dead-end.

I stopped and stared. *You've gotta be kidding me*, was what I was thinking.

If you Google "haunted house," you will see a bunch of pictures that look *exactly* like 742 Wroughtwood Place. I'm serious. It was like the cover picture on a book of ghost stories—a big, broken-down house, it looked like it was at least a hundred years old. It was painted blue a long time ago, but what was left of the paint was peeling off, showing the gray, rotten-looking wood underneath. The windows were tall, and came to a point at the top, and everything about the house seemed to be sagging: the porch was sagging, the roof was sagging, as well as the gate that was hanging from the

iron fence that surrounded the place. It didn't just look like a haunted house, it looked like a *cliché* of a haunted house. I swear, if you hung a fake plastic skeleton from the bare tree by the porch, you would have yourself a perfect Halloween Haunted House and you could charge $5 bucks to take little kids on a tour through it and scare them stupid. But this was definitely the place, there was no doubt about it. The number 742 was plain to see, the tarnished brass numbers nailed by the front door.

As I walked toward the house, I noticed it not only *looked* creepy, it *felt* creepy. Little things were weird, like the fact that all of the normal sounds of the outdoors—birds chirping, leaves rustling in the wind, even the faint sound of traffic in the distance—all of it was suddenly gone and it was very quiet, and very cold. Not cold from the outside; it was like the cold was coming from *inside* me.

I walked toward the house, my footsteps the only sound. I pushed open the iron gate and headed up the broken brick walk, walking past the tall weeds that had choked out the lawn long ago. I hesitated for a second before stepping up on the porch—half-afraid it might collapse—but I risked it, and went to the front door and knocked.

The door creaked open. I swear, I am not kidding you. I knocked and the heavy old door slowly opened with a *crreeak*. It was dark inside—too dark to see anything clearly.

"Hello?" I said, not very loudly. I didn't believe in ghosts or monsters (yet), but I was still creeped out by the whole scene, and I wasn't exactly sure I wanted to catch the attention of whoever or whatever was currently living at 742 Wroughtwood Place. So I just stood there, not sure what to do next. I thought very seriously about turning around and heading back to town, but just then, something inside the house caught my eye. Actually, it *hurt* my eye—a bright glint from the setting sun reflected off of the glass covering a

picture on the entryway wall, just a few feet from the front door. I squinted and moved my head around so I could see the picture better and then, when I got a clear look at it, I got the weird feeling again that I had been there before.

I *knew* that picture. Somewhere, sometime, I had seen that picture, but I couldn't see it clearly until I leaned into the doorway and got a closer look, and once I did, I actually shivered. But not from the cold.

It was a picture of *me*.

Four years old, blonde crew-cut, standing on the porch I was standing on right at that moment, squinting up at the camera with a big grin.

Me.

I recognized myself, even at age four, but even weirder, I recognized the picture itself. I had seen it many times and I recognized everything about it—the little overalls I was wearing, the sun on my grinning little face, making me squint…and the small toy in my hand.

I remember that little red truck…the one with the left front wheel that wobbled…

I leaned in farther, stepping one foot into the house, and just as I looked closer at the picture, at that little toy truck—

"Jacob?"

I am telling you, I nearly jumped about ten feet into the air. I jerked back, out of the doorway, stumbling, my heart pounding, and I saw a guy in a business suit standing at the foot of the stairway inside, looking at me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you," the man said, smiling awkwardly. He was not at all what the kiddies would expect on their Halloween tour. He was as normal-looking as you can get: neat, conservative suit and tie, neat, conservative brown hair in a neat, conservative cut; neat, conservative smile with neat,

conservative teeth. He looked like a banker, or an anchorman on the news. He walked toward me and held out his neat, conservative hand.

"I'm Bill Smith, attorney for the estate," he said. I shook his hand and he looked at the picture on the wall, then back at me, then back at the picture. "Are you Jacob? Jacob Grimm?"

I hesitated. I had seen enough *Law & Order* to know you have to watch what you say to lawyers. And anyway, I was still getting over having the crap scared out of me.

"Yes," I said, finally.

"Boy, have we been looking for you!" lawyer Smith said, in a booming voice. He seemed very relieved, and he turned toward the dining room and motioned for me to come with him. I followed him to the dining room and he pulled out a couple of chairs so we could sit at the big, heavy wooden table.

"I managed to track you back to Child Services in L.A., but they have been less than forthcoming regarding your, ah, current guardianship status," he said. Then he stopped and looked over my shoulder, out the front door.

"Are your, ah, folks with you?" he asked.

"No," I said.

"Oh," he said. He seemed confused. "You're…by yourself?"

"Uh huh."

"Oh," he said again. "How did you get here?"

"Train," I said. I didn't say anything more and he blinked at me several times, like he was waiting for me to say more.

"Train," he said, forcing a smile to cover up how confused he seemed to be. "From Los Angeles, right?"

"Right."

"Okay, then!" he exclaimed, after blinking at me some more. On the floor near the head of the table were two big briefcases the size of suitcases—the kind lawyers carry to court. Smith continued

talking as he lifted one of the briefcases onto the table and opened it and started pulling out thick stacks of papers clipped together with big black steel clamps.

“I’m a tax attorney, so the probate issues are a little new to me,” he said, as he laid the papers out in neat, conservative piles. “I’m originally from Woodland. My father was your great-uncle’s lawyer. He drew up the will. My father passed away last year, but your great uncle left very specific instructions, so we should be able to get through it all without too much trouble, I hope.”

“Get through what?” I asked.

Smith looked confused again. Then his eyes softened at me and he said, “The reading of the will, son.”

“What will?” I said.

“Eustace’s will. Your great uncle,” he said.

“My great uncle’s dead?” I said.

Now Smith looked *really* confused.

“I’m sorry, I assumed that’s why you’re here…” he said in a kind of halfhearted way, trailing off, like he wanted me to explain everything to him.

“When did he die?” I asked him.

“Four days ago,” Smith said. “You…didn’t know?”

I shook my head. “No,” I said.

“Why, ah…if I may ask…why did you come here, then?” he said.

I couldn’t think of a good answer, so I just shrugged.

“Uh huh,” Smith said, after staring at me for a long moment. Then he started stacking and re-stacking the documents on the table. “Goodness. This is a bit awkward, then. Hm. Give me a moment, I have to think about this…” Smith rubbed his chin and picked up a piece of paper and studied it.

I waited, looking around, noticing for the first time just how strange the house was. Along one wall of the parlor, next to the

dining room, were rows of shelves with books and bizarre knickknacks crammed into every spare inch of space. Hanging on the opposite parlor wall was a large metal shield and a huge plaster sculpture of something that looked like a dragon. I got up from the table and wandered into the parlor and saw, hanging on another wall, was a long row of jaws—a dozen or more, ranging from tiny little jaws to massive jaws open wide, with fierce yellow teeth that looked as sharp as razors. They were too big to be bear jaws, and too weird to be shark jaws, at least as far as I knew. I stared at them, wondering just what in the world I had wandered into.

Smith cleared his throat and I turned back to him.

"We, ah, we can at least begin with the reading of the will before your par— er, your guardians can get here," he said. He lifted the second big briefcase up onto the table.

"Your great-uncle Eustace said that you should read the will in its entirety before we proceed with anything else. He was very adamant about that." As Smith spoke, he opened the briefcase and took out a leather-bound document the size of the Los Angeles phone book, and put it on the table.

"My father witnessed the will, then placed it at an undisclosed location, with Eustace's instructions that it not be opened by anyone but you, and not until the time of his death." Smith took an ornate, ancient-looking dagger from his briefcase. "He, ah, insisted that you break the seal with this."

Smith held the dagger out to me, then turned the leather-bound will toward me so I could see the heavy wax seal which had been stamped onto the wide velvet belt that wrapped around the thick book like a belt. Stamped into the red wax seal were the initials "EWG," and over the letters was a kind of imprint that looked like the metal shield hanging in the parlor.

I looked down at the will. I started to slide the blade of the dagger under the seal, to cut it open, when suddenly a kind of awful

feeling came over me—I suddenly felt like once I broke that seal, my life would change forever. And not necessarily in a *good* way.

But that's what I had wanted, right? To get out of Van Nuys, to get away from Heather and Gerald and the "special" school and all of the trouble and crap I was going through. That's what I had wanted. A different life.

Right?

It never occurred to me that "different" might also mean "very creepy and possibly dangerous."

Smith cleared his throat softly, shuffling his feet.

"The, ah, the will is quite long," Smith said softly, glancing at his watch.

I looked at him for a while, until he looked away. Then I looked back down at the will.

Then I slid the blade of the dagger under the blood-red wax seal, and sliced through it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Gorgon Is Loosed

Rachel Eaton steered the Range Rover with one greasy hand, while munching on some fried food in her other hand. There was a large cardboard bucket between her thighs—the grease from the fried food inside was seeping through the cardboard and staining her yoga tights. She had grease all over her lips and down her chin; drops of grease and other stains speckled the front of her white Spandex tank top.

She shoved a huge bite into her wide jaws—her teeth had lengthened and sharpened and they crunched powerfully through the flesh and bone. She closed her eyes in ecstasy.

"And the earth spilt forth the fruit of humanity and all were fed to bursting on the flesh that satisfies every urge, every need; the flesh that is life itself, in the fullest expression of Nature…"

Sixteen years, Rachel thought, savoring the food in her mouth. Sixteen years of fasting for a real meal, eating the putrid food of the dirtfolk…godawful stuff…tasteless, useless pablum that left her sick, empty, and bitter with hatred. But now the Huntsman was gone. Gone, gone, gone…forever!

Rachel devoured the food in her hand, overcome with pleasure. She was so overcome that she didn't see the intersection until she was upon it. She was driving too fast, impatient to get back home from the market and begin really feeding again. She didn't see the Sheriff's patrol car crossing in front of her at the intersection until it was almost too late and she nearly collided with it. But she whipped around it at the last second before speeding off. After a

moment, the flashing lights in her rearview mirror caught her attention.

"Damn!" she said, sputtering chunks of food over the dashboard. She yanked the wheel to the right and stopped on the gravel shoulder of the road with a short skid. She watched as Sheriff Ansel Cord took his sweet time getting out of the patrol car behind her. He hitched up his pants and ambled toward the Range Rover.

Rachel stuffed the bucket of food behind her seat, wiped her hands on her tights, and her long, sharp, yellowed teeth retracted back to form a normal-looking, perfect white smile. She glanced in the mirror and wiped the grease from her face with the back of her arm, then smoothed her long, blonde hair and pressed the button to open her window. She looked up with her prettiest, wide-eyed, little-girl expression at Sheriff Cord as he reached her window.

"I am so sorry, Ansel," she pouted. "Please don't give me another ticket. My insurance company said they'd drop me."

"Rachel, you have got to slow down or you're gonna kill somebody," Sheriff Cord said.

"Oh, my," Rachel said, putting her hand on her chest. "God forbid. Lord knows I would never want anything like that to happen."

The sheriff glanced into the back of the Rover and noticed ten bags of groceries which were tossed hastily inside. Sheriff Ansel Cord was forty-four and he wore a moustache that he thought made him look like Tom Selleck, from Magnum P.I. Magnum was a TV detective that Sheriff Cord had watched as a young boy. Magnum was handsome, charming, and all of the girls were crazy about him. Ansel joined the Woodland Sheriff's Dept. right out of high school, as soon as his moustache came in thick, and he'd been wondering for years why none of the women in town were crazy about him. But that didn't stop him from trying. He had never

married and he wasn't about to—he wanted to stay "available." And, after years of hanging out at the bars in Woodland, Beedleton, and even Medford, Sheriff Ansel Cord never found a girl who went crazy over his moustache and badge, and now he spent most evenings drinking beer alone and watching reruns of Magnum P.I.

"You catering something tonight?" Sheriff Cord asked Rachel, looking at the groceries in the back of her Range Rover.

"Yes, I was going to prepare something for the vigil," Rachel said.

Sheriff Cord stared blankly at her.

"The candlelight vigil tonight?" Rachel said. "For the Peyton twins?"

"Oh, yeah," the sheriff nodded. "Right, that's tonight."

"Yeah," Rachel said, her eyes looking sad. "Those poor kids. Their parents must be at their wits end."

"Yeah," the sheriff said. "Well…"

"That's why I was in such a hurry. I've got so much food to prepare for the crowd," she said. "Please, Ansel, don't give me another ticket. I promise I won't do it again." Rachel gave him a coy little look.

Sheriff Cord smiled his best Magnum P.I. smile, then patted her arm and said, "Well, alright, Rachel. But if I have to stop you again I'm gonna pull your license. I mean it this time."

Sheriff Cord had pulled Rachel over countless times. The woman had a lead foot, but Sheriff Cord let her slide most of the time because he thought maybe, just maybe, if he was nice to her she might want to have a drink sometime... He had never asked her, but each time he stopped her he had become a little more familiar. He intended to let his hand linger on her arm, but pulled away instinctively when he noticed her skin was colder than ice.

"Thank you, Ansel," Rachel said, in her little-girl voice. "You're such a sweetie."

“Alrightie, then,” the sheriff said, for lack of anything else to say. “You drive safe now, hon.”

“Yes sir,” she replied, and watched as Sheriff Cord turned from her window and walked back to his patrol car. “Half-wit,” she muttered under her breath.

She started her car and drove off, reaching back for another piece of fried food in the bucket behind her. She bit down on it and her long, sharp teeth extended and crunched down on something as hard as a rock. She cursed and spit the food into her hand as she drove. If she had looked more carefully at the food in her hand she would have seen something shiny—something silver, with a cheap gemstone embedded in it. But Rachel was in a hurry, so she just flung the mouthful of food out the window by the side of the road, just as she passed the high school. The mouthful of greasy food landed right by the high school’s sign, which bore a picture of the school’s mascot—a griffin.

Rachel watched her rearview mirror, and as soon as she was out of the sheriff’s sight, she pushed the gas pedal down to the floor and sped off, in a hurry to get home. The hunger was coming on strong now, stronger than ever.

So much to do, so much to do…

CHAPTER NINE

The Weirdest Will In The World

The blade of the ornate dagger was razor sharp, and it sliced through the blood-red wax seal easily. I watched as lawyer Smith slid the velvet belt off of the leather-bound will, then opened it to the first page. Smith cleared his throat, preparing to read aloud, then stopped, his brow wrinkled.

"This is odd," Smith said. "Is this…Russian?"

He turned to will toward me, across the table, and I looked at the writing. It looked like another language, but after staring at it for a moment, I realized it wasn't.

"It's English," I said. "Written backwards."

"Hm," Smith said. He turned the book back to look at it. "So it is," he said. He turned a few pages—all of them filled with the same small, neat, old-fashioned handwriting, all of it backwards.

"Good lord," the lawyer said. "How on earth are we going to…" he trailed off, staring at the occasional sketch of a strange creature or some other oddity that cropped up as he flipped through the huge document.

"How on earth are we going to read this?" he said.

"With a mirror," I said, remembering I had read somewhere that Leonardo Da Vinci had written his journals backwards so no one could steal his ideas. He had used a mirror to write them, then used a mirror to read them back.

"There must be a mirror that my great-uncle used, somewhere," I said. I got up from the table and started looking around. I looked through an antique hutch, then went to a pantry and opened it. Inside were more strange objects: a row of daggers, with fancy

carved handles, an oil lamp, a pair of some kind of animal horns, and, hanging at the back of the pantry, a large, golden axe.

Smith leaned around me to look inside the pantry. His eyebrows raised, but he didn't say anything. I looked down, near Smith, and there on the floor, under the table, was a hand mirror, right at Smith's feet. I kneeled down and picked it up. It was heavy, with a fancy silver frame, and a single crack right down the middle of the mirror itself. I stood up and handed the mirror to Smith, who was getting more confused by the second.

"Curiouser and curiouser," he said, trying to be funny, I guess, but he hesitated before taking the cracked mirror and holding it awkwardly over the first page of the will to start reading. I sat down across from him and he cleared his throat and began to read in a slow, halting way, moving the mirror line by line as he read out loud:

"I, Eustace Wilhelm Grimm, being of sound mind, leave the entirety of my estate to my one remaining descendent, my beloved great-nephew Jacob," Smith read. He glanced up at me as that first line started to sink in.

"*The entirety of the estate." All of this…this crazy house, these strange objects…these things were all mine now?*

Smith continued reading: "…and, in accordance with the Grimm family's grave responsibilities and special gifts, do herewith instruct Master Jacob to complete the reading of the will and the Initiation of the Huntsman, to transfer these powers to his hands, specifically the sacred powers to stop the inhuman creatures of Woodland and their destruction, mayhem, and death…"

Smith paused, glancing up at me to see how I was handling all of this.

I can tell you I was not handling it well. Neither was Smith, as far as I could see.

He continued reading: "…these gifts, along with the knowledge within this document, will enable Master Jacob to carry on as the Huntsman of Woodland, keeping watch over all of its inhabitants, including but not limited to, humans, witches, giants…trolls…eye-pecking ravens…" Smith trailed off, then stopped reading out loud. He read on in silence for a moment, then he put the mirror down.

"Um," he said. Then he looked at me. By this time I was completely freaking out, of course, but before I could say anything, Smith cleared his throat again, and said what I was already thinking.

"I'm a tax attorney, son, so I am not familiar with the finer points of probate law, but it appears that your great uncle Eustace was, ah, not what you would call, ah…"

"…Of sound mind?" I said.

"Yes!" he said, too loudly, relieved that he didn't have to inform me that my great uncle Eustace had apparently been crazier than a craphouse bat.

I reached for the will and the mirror, then turned the heavy document around and thumbed through it, reading page headings at random:

Instructions On Burning The Malefic.

How To Recognize The Shape-Shifted Ogrenon.

Mating Habits Of The Wood Nymph.

On Destroying The Ninth Life Of The Deadly Familiar.

I stopped reading and looked up at Smith. We stared at each other for what seemed like ten minutes of awkward silence across the big table.

"I'm out of my depth here, son." he said. "I'd take the will back to my firm in Portland and have one of the probate guys look at it, but my instructions are that the will never leave your possession once you've broken the seal. Not sure what to do, here…"

I waited as he shuffled through some more papers. He read through some of his papers, rubbing his chin, lost in thought.

“I suppose I could get one of the probate attorneys to come here, unless you come back to Portland with me. We’ll have to get in touch with your folks, either way,” he said. “Since you’re a minor and this is…an unusual situation, to say the least.”

“I don’t have any parents,” I said.

“Your legal guardians, I mean,” Smith said.

“I don’t have any,” I said. “I ran away from home.”

“You…ran…away…from home,” Smith repeated, blinking at me again. He was not only out of his depth, he was completely underwater now, drowning in weirdness and confusion. My explanation that I had run away seemed to drain him of any energy he had left, and he kind of collapsed in on himself and sagged in his neat, conservative suit like a day-old birthday balloon with a slow leak. I felt sorry for him.

“I’m on my own,” I said.

Smith stared at me and his shoulders slumped even more. He started rubbing his forehead.

“Well, then…this—this is a pickle,” he said. “Son, you’re a minor, you *have* to have legal guardians.”

“Why?”

“Why?” he said. He started to say something, but he didn’t seem to have a good answer. “I’ll have to go over that with one of the firm’s family law people.”

“Okay,” I said.

“How do you…where do you live?” he asked me.

I shrugged and looked around the house. “Here, I guess. For now, anyway,” I said.

Smith opened his mouth to say something, then closed it. We sat there for another long moment, in silence. Smith’s eyes moved

back and forth as he rolled the problem around in his head. He was totally lost.

"I'm a *tax attorney*," he finally said, with a helpless little shrug, his voice going high and squeaky.

"You said that," I said.

"I came here to appraise the house," he said. "I didn't expect to see you or…have to deal with…" he trailed off again, and thought some more.

"Wait," he said, and reached into one of the big briefcases. "There was a note attached to the cover of the will. It came off and I put it…somewhere…"

Smith rummaged around in the briefcase, then pulled out a small piece of paper that looked like old parchment. He handed it to me. It was written in my great-uncle's handwriting, but it wasn't backwards: *"Jacob – after reading the will, you must immediately contact Mistress Madeleine at the telephone number below, right away. Do not hesitate."*

"I don't suppose you know who this Mistress Madeleine is," Smith said.

"Nope," I said.

"Well, whoever it is may have some answers for us. Why don't you give her a call," he said. "I tried to call her myself, but my cell doesn't seem to work here. I was looking around for a phone when you arrived." Smith glanced out the window. It was getting dark out. He looked at his watch.

"I have to drive to Medford to catch the redeye back to Portland tonight," he said. "I can drive you into town, and there's a pay phone near the square. You could call this…Mistress Madeleine and maybe we can at least get you squared away for the night, if she's, ah…helpful." Smith got up from the table and picked up a yellow pad.

“I have to finish an appraisal of the property,” he said. “We’ll head out in an hour or so?”

“Okay,” I said.

CHAPTER TEN

Mistress Madeleine And The Severed Hand

Madeleine O'Hara hurried past the road flares that led to the small crime scene in front of Woodland High School. Madeleine was fifteen but people often assumed she was older—she had long, strawberry blonde hair that coiled around her face, unless she had it pulled back in a ponytail, as she did now. She was wearing a Woodland High sweatshirt, jeans, and she had a large, bulging backpack over her shoulder. The main reason people often assumed Madeleine was older was not so much because of her looks, it was because she was very smart, very hard-headed, and very opinionated. You didn't want to get into an argument with Madeleine, even if you were an adult, and very smart yourself. Madeleine would never bother to argue unless she knew she was right. And she was almost always right. Almost.

Since Eustace's death, Madeleine had been through hell. Of course she missed him, and cried terribly when she first got the news from her mother, Jenna. Her mother was a nurse at Woodland Hospital, and she often did double-duty as an EMT. It was Jenna who had found Eustace, dead of heart failure, on his dining room floor on that terrible morning. And it was Madeleine who had called the hospital to tell her mother she should check on Eustace on that wretched, hateful day. All morning at school, Madeleine had felt a sickening kind of dread. Eustace hadn't answered the door when Madeleine had stopped by the house before school, as she always did. A good apprentice is reliable, prompt, and thorough. Eustace had taught her well, and treated her like she was his own child, or grandchild. Madeleine's father had died when she was very small, and Jenna relied on Eustace, who lived close by, to

help raise Madeleine, her only child. But Jenna had no idea her daughter was being groomed as an apprentice. Jenna would have completely freaked out if she had any idea the kind of danger Eustace had allowed Madeleine to face. Jenna wouldn't have understood how well Eustace had prepared her daughter.

Madeleine had learned so much from Eustace…and now he was gone. And, just as Eustace had predicted, there was already trouble. Terrible things were already starting to happen, and Master Jacob had not come to Woodland, as Eustace had promised. This was extremely bad. Madeleine's worst fear was that Jacob would never come, and she would be left alone to deal with the horrors that would soon overwhelm the town; she would be left alone, the entire town vulnerable, without a Huntsman.

Madeleine picked up the pace, hurrying to the crime scene, where her mother Jenna and Sheriff Cord were kneeling and shining flashlights over something on the ground, right next to the Woodland High sign with the picture of the griffin mascot.

It's already happening, Madeleine thought to herself. *The Peyton twins, and God knows what else…*

Jenna looked up as Madeleine approached.

"Maddie, stay back," Jenna said to her daughter.

Madeleine ignored her mother's admonition and came up to see, in the glare from the flashlights, a small clump of something on the ground. Sheriff Cord moved the clump with the tip of a pencil, and Madeleine saw the stark white, slender bone, with something silver on it.

Jenna and Sheriff Cord spoke in low tones, but Madeleine heard most of it:

"Radiocarpal joint—wrist bone," Jenna said, as she examined the clump. "The radius is intact, but severed a couple of centimeters up. And they haven't been out here long…"

"Could an animal have done this?" Sheriff Cord asked.

“I’ve seen hundreds of animal bites and there’s nothing around here that would leave bite marks like these,” Jenna said, shaking her head. “Too powerful. Too…sharp. See how clean the breaks are?”

“Bag it, tag it, and send it to the M.E. in Medford,” the sheriff said.

Madeleine looked closer as Jenna picked up the clump carefully with a pair of forceps. And when Madeleine saw what was in the forceps, her breath caught in her throat.

It was a hand—or what was left of it. Madeleine saw four bones—fingers—and on the third finger was a silver ring with a sapphire blue birthstone.

A Woodland High class ring. A ring that Madeleine knew had belonged to Greg Peyton.

Madeleine pushed back her emotions, the way Eustace had taught her, and took out her phone and snapped a couple of pictures of the bones before her mother saw what she was doing.

“Maddie, go home,” Jenna said, in a harsh tone she rarely used.

“It’s Greg Peyton, isn’t it?” Madeleine said.

“GO HOME,” Jenna said, blocking Madeleine’s view of the bones.

There was no use arguing. That was another thing Eustace had taught Madeleine. Never argue about the Otherworld, never try to convince people, never attempt to recruit people to the fight—they will wind up fighting *you*.

Madeleine turned away, but she didn’t leave. She looked down at the picture on her phone. A tear dropped onto the phone’s illuminated screen, and Madeleine quickly brushed it away. *Emotion is a luxury you cannot afford in the midst of battle*, Eustace had told her many times. *Plenty of time to feel things later; more time than you know, Maddie, believe me. Plenty of time for grief, regret, doubt, and all of the things human beings go through*

when faced with the Unspeakable. Those feelings have their place; they're natural and unavoidable. But you cannot indulge those feelings when in battle. They will weaken you and destroy you if you let them.

Those words had kept Madeleine alive and effective against the terrors she had faced and felt, but now everything was different. Eustace was gone, and Madeleine had never felt more alone, or more afraid, in her life. She fought to keep the tears and her terror at bay.

The screen on her phone suddenly blinked with a caller ID that said PAY PHONE, and the phone in her hand chimed.

Who would be calling me from a pay phone? Madeleine wondered as she put the phone to her ear.

"Hello?" she said.

"Hello, is this…Mistress Madeleine?"

It was a young man's voice, and Madeleine knew right away who it was.

"Jacob," she said, overcome with relief.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

I Meet Madeleine And She Is A Total Nutjob

"Jacob," the girl's voice said again, over the phone to me. "It's you, isn't it?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'm Jacob—Jake—Grimm." I wasn't used yet to being called my *real* name.

"I'm *so* glad—" she said. "Yes, yes, I'm Madeleine. Where are you?"

Whoever "Mistress Madeleine" was, she sounded very strange, but very happy to hear from me.

"I'm at a phone booth, by the square." I said, looking out at lawyer Smith though the glass door of the phone booth. Smith was sitting in his rental car, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and looking at his watch.

"Good," Madeleine said. "You're not far from me. I'm at the school. You have to come to me right away."

"Why?" I said. "I don't mean to be rude, but who are you? What's going on?"

"I'll explain when I see you," she said. "Please hurry. There's no time."

"You're at the school?" I said.

"Yes, at Woodland High," she said. "Just follow the road flares."

"Follow the flares," I said, uncertainly. "O-kay."

"I'll see you in a minute. Hurry."

I hung up, wondering what I should do. This person on the phone sounded sort of breathless and crazy, and I had had enough crazy for one day. I was very tired and very hungry and I was starting to feel lightheaded. The last thing I wanted to do was dive

into the deep end of the insanity pool with a person I'd never met, but as I walked back to Smith's car, I decided I would at least find out what this Madeleine girl wanted from me. On the short drive to the phone booth, Smith had started talking about guardians and foster families and I wanted no part of that, either. So I got back in the car and told Smith to take me to the school.

We drove around the square and I noticed people were starting to gather around the bandstand with lighted candles in little paper holders. There were people handing out flyers for the missing twins that I had read about at the library. Smith noticed it too, but neither of us said anything.

We pulled up to the school a couple of minutes later, and I saw the road flares. Smith and I got out and walked toward the Sheriff's car, where a small group of people were gathered. A deputy with a large belly was trying to keep the gathering crowd, mostly high school kids, away from something officers were examining on the ground.

"Jacob!" came a girl's voice behind me. I turned and saw a girl about my age rushing up to me. She had a long, curly ponytail and a Woodland High sweatshirt, and she was carrying a backpack that was bulging with something big, and apparently very heavy, considering how she kept shifting its weight on her shoulder.

She came up to me and took my hand and looked me in the eye and said, "I recognize you. From the pictures Eustace showed me." She gave me a quick hug.

"We have to get going," she said quietly. "It's already started."

She started to pull me away when Smith reached out his hand to her.

"Hi, I'm Bill Smith, I represent the Grimm estate…" he began.

"Nice to meet you!" Madeleine called back to him as she pulled me away. I looked back and saw a woman in a nurse's outfit

watching us. I saw Smith shake the nurse's hand and they began talking as Madeleine pulled me away.

Madeleine took me around the corner of the school building, out of sight. It was dark now—except for the full moon—and I nearly had to run to keep up with her as we crossed the football field, heading toward the woods.

"What was going on back there?" I said. "With the cops?"

"That's what we're about to find out," she said. "Come on, hurry."

"Come on *where?*" I said.

She gave me a funny look.

"To the woods, of course," she said.

"Of course," I said. "How stupid of me."

She marched ahead, until we reached the woods. I followed her into the thick forest, stumbling over roots and ducking spider webs, falling behind her.

"I'm so glad you're here, you have no idea," she said. "The trouble started when Eustace got sick. He just couldn't keep up."

"I know the feeling," I said, pushing a tree branch out of my face.

"Without a Huntsman we have no idea whether we're dealing with a Malefic or even an ogre," she said. "Now that you're here we're about to find out."

"Where do you get your drugs?" I said, under my breath. If she heard me she acted like she didn't, and marched on through the darkness.

"And why, exactly, are we heading into the woods?" I asked.
"To perform the Initiation, of course," she said, like I was some kind of moron. Then she stopped and stared at me as I caught up with her.

"You read the will, right?" she asked, with an alarmed look on her face, her eyes wide.

“Oh…yeah…sure,” I lied, and she turned and kept on walking ahead of me. “It’s just that, ah, it was kind of long and I don’t remember every little detail, exactly…” I said, following her once again.

“That’s okay,” she said. “Eustace said it would take a while for you to absorb the whole thing.”

“Yeah, I’m still…absorbing…” I said, struggling to keep up with her. “Remind me about the, ah, Initiation?”

“Well, as you know, we first have to scatter Eustace’s ashes in a clearing in the direct light of the moon, which will reach maximum fullness in just a few minutes…” she slipped off her backpack and unzipped it and showed me a silver urn inside.

“You’re carrying my great uncle’s ashes in your backpack?” I said.

“Of *course*,” she said, like I’d just informed her that the earth revolved around the sun. “I never thought I’d be present at the birth of a Huntsman!” she added.

I moved away from her a little bit.

“Me either,” I said.

“Come *on*,” she said, and hurried through the woods ahead of me.

Curiouser and curiouser, I thought.

But I followed.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Rachel Makes Brownies

Rachel hummed a four hundred year-old song—The Song of the Feast—as she moved quickly around her kitchen, making brownies. She was still wearing the yoga outfit, which was now covered with grease and stains of many colors and textures. Her lovely blonde hair was becoming brittle and dry and her skin had a pale sheen to it, like she was covered with some kind of filmy oil. She was also developing quite a serious potbelly, which looked rather ridiculous, given that her limbs were still long and yoga-thin. She glanced down at her swelling belly and patted it happily, satisfied to see that she was starting to get her figure back.

On the counter were three large trays of brownies. The brownies on two of the trays had been frosted with thick, white icing, but the third tray had yet to be frosted. Rachel opened a pantry door, revealing the world's most bizarre spice rack: there were hundreds of bottles inside, labeled in different languages, some with no label at all. There were normal herbs and spices—oregano, thyme, rosemary—but mixed among them were oddly shaped bottles with labels like "PICKLED NIXIES," "ICHOR OF EEL NYMPH," and "PARTIALLY HYDROGENATED TOAD TOE."

Rachel took a large plastic bottle of Sprite from a shelf. She twisted the cap off of the bottle and shook out a tiny, wriggling sprite—a winged fairy the size of a dragonfly. Rachel closed her filmy palm around the squealing little sprite the way you would hold a fluttering moth in your hand. She carried it over to the large butcher-block table in the center of the kitchen, lifted the lid on the Cuisinart, and dumped the fluttering little fairy into the food

processor. She replaced the lid, then hit the button on the machine that read "Puree." The tiny squeals were cut short by the whining blades of the food processor and the inside of the glass container was sprayed with bright green fluid.

Rachel scraped the green fluid from the glass with a small rubber spatula. After collecting almost all of the thick green glop, she plopped the stuff into a bowl of white frosting and mixed it vigorously with the spatula, turning the frosting a bright, iridescent green.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Initiation And The Talking Wolf

I had just about had it with Madeleine and our freak-show journey into the woods, and I was about to tell her I was going to turn back and head home (wherever that was) when we reached a clearing, which was illuminated by the full moon.

"This is it," she said, looking up to check on the moon. She put the backpack on the ground and opened it and took out my uncle's remains.

I stood back from her as she solemnly, carefully removed the lid on the silver urn. In the moonlight I could see the elaborate engraving on the container, which was similar to the wax seal on the will. There was an etching of the shield from the parlor wall—which I figured was some kind of family crest—and the initials EWG.

I stood there, wondering, *Is she really going to dump the ashes right out here onto the…?*

Then she held the urn up toward the full moon, took a deep breath, and began to speak:

"We the living pass the soul of Eustace Grimm to the place from whence it came," she intoned in a hushed voice. "And in its passing, let the scales fall from the eyes of the new Huntsman, so that he might see."

With that, she slowly turned the urn upside down, and the pale gray ashes spilled out onto the forest floor. Dust from the ashes rose up all around us in a thick cloud, nearly blotting out the bright moon. I backed away farther, not wanting to *breathe the ashes of my dead relative, for God's sake.*

Madeleine closed her eyes and murmured a few words in a language that sounded like German, as near as I could tell. Then she turned to me. Through the dim, ash-filled night air, I could see that her eyes were wet with tears, and very serious.

"Jacob Grimm," she said softly. "You are now the Huntsman of Woodland. May your greatest fears become your greatest strengths."

I tried to think of some kind of response, but what would that be, exactly? No spell overcame me, there was no sudden, magical feeling; I didn't levitate or anything, and I certainly hadn't expected to. All I could think about was getting the hell out of there, out of the woods, away from this girl, and away from the cloud of dust that used to be my great uncle.

"Okay, then," I said, coughing a little, having inhaled a brief breath of the spreading gray cloud. "I think I'm gonna go now—"

I started to turn away, then stopped in my tracks.

Beyond Madeleine, through the cloud of dust, where a moment earlier there was only darkness, there were now…eyes.

Eyes.

Dozens of them, approaching us from the dark woods. Green, glowing eyes, dull red eyes, large eyes and small eyes, some narrow and sinister, some wide and timid-looking. Most of them were in pairs, but here and there was a single, large, glowing, eyeball the size of a basketball.

My first response was to run back the way we came, but there were *eyes* behind me as well. In fact, there were eyes *everywhere*—high up in the trees, flying overhead, silhouetted against the moon, creeping and slithering toward me through the brush. And as they came closer, I could start to see the strange forms of the creatures themselves—the creatures whose eyes were staring at me—through the dust and the shadows of the forest. But before I could get a

good look, the creatures with the glowing eyes stopped at the edge of the clearing. They stopped and just *stared*.

I stood there, frozen. I mean, *frozen*. I had even forgotten to breathe. I moved closer to Madeleine and whispered.

“Are you seeing this?” I said, the words coming out trembling and shaky.

“Yes,” Madeleine replied softly, her voice far calmer than mine. “Don’t show any fear. They won’t come closer unless they sense fear.”

Fear?? I was *about to crap my pants*. My whole body seemed to be one big shiver, and every hair was standing on end, like it was shot through with electricity. Every inch of me—every part of me—was shaking, and I couldn’t get my feet to move.

There was a rustling sound, behind Madeleine, and the *eyes* moved around, parting, making way for something that was trotting along the forest floor toward us.

I saw its eyes first, along with the others: narrow yellow eyes, focused on me, moving fast, heading right toward me, and then I could see that it was a wolf—a very big one—its head low, its glowing eyes never leaving mine. It didn’t hesitate like the other creatures—it trotted right out into the clearing, into the moonlight, right toward us, head low, teeth bared. I had never seen a real wolf, except on TV, and I had no idea wolves could grow that big. As it came closer it raised its head, which was as high as my chest, and then it slowed as it came closer still, within a leap’s distance, and *stood up on its hind legs and walked like a man, right up to me.*

I was shaking even harder as the wolf walked up to me, close enough for me to feel its breath on my face. The wolf looked down at me, towering at least a foot over me, and its black lips pulled back in a vicious, cruel expression.

It was *grinning* at me.

A low growl began deep in its huge chest, and then the growl became a laugh.

It leaned close enough to bite off my nose with one snap of its jaws.

“You must be the new guy,” the wolf said to me in a deep, rumbling voice that rattled my ribs. I swear, I thought I was going to pass out.

The wolf looked into my eyes, still chuckling in that terrible low growl.

“See ya later,” the wolf said, and then dropped back down on its four legs and galloped off into the woods and was gone. The *eyes* followed the wolf, retreating back into the woods after it, flying off, stomping off, slithering off, leaving Madeleine and me alone in the moonlit clearing as the wind blew what was left of my great uncle Eustace away, into the cold, clear, night sky.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I Learn About The Huntsman And Eat The Best Brownie Ever

To be totally honest with you, I don't remember much from the moments right after that whacked-out encounter in the woods. I only remember running from the woods—this time *I* was leading *her*—and I remember the two of us shouting at each other. It went something like this:

Me: "WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?!"

Madeleine: "They recognized you—they all knew the Initiation was coming."

Me: "Who are THEY??"

Madeleine: "The Otherworld! It was in the will—"

Me: "The wolf—it *TALKED TO ME!!"*

Madeleine: "I know! I *hate* that guy…"

And so on.

Then I remember running back across the football field, past the school, toward the town square, where we suddenly found ourselves in the middle of a huge crowd of people, who were all gathered around the bandstand, holding lighted candles in little paper holders. Some people had signs, with pictures of the missing Peyton twins on them.

Madeleine grabbed me and stopped me from running as a man in a priest's collar stood at the top of the steps of the bandstand and led the crowd in a prayer. I must have still been shouting questions at Madeleine because she put her finger against my lips and said "Shhh!"

We stopped, and Madeleine bowed her head and I stood there, trying to calm down. I looked around at the crowd, their heads bowed, candles lighting up their somber faces. I was still shaking—

I was *vibrating*—like someone had hooked me up to a hundred volts of electricity and thrown cold water on me. People always talk about how they react to horrible things, like a car wreck, or something…they always say things like "everything slowed down, like slow-motion," or something like that. But I can tell you, there was nothing "slow-motion" about the way I was feeling. My heart was pounding about a hundred miles an hour and my brain was running even faster. I couldn't stand still. It's not like *time* had slowed down, it's that everyone *else* seemed to slow down because *I* was all amped up, running at fifty times regular speed while everyone around me was stuck on normal. I can tell you one thing for sure, that guy's prayer took *forever.* I kept looking over my shoulder to see if that *FREAKING TALKING WOLF HAD FOLLOWED US.*

"Amen," the priest finally said, and the crowd murmured "Amen," and lifted their faces to the priest as he talked about the missing Peyton twins in a voice too low for me to hear. I looked around at the crowd. There were high school kids with their parents, and other townsfolk—it seemed like all of Woodland had turned out for the vigil.

"Tell me what you see," Madeleine said to me.

"What?"

"Look at them—at the crowd. What do you see?" she said.

"I see…a crowd of people…what are you talking about?" I said, then Madeleine pulled me aside.

"Am I going crazy?" I said. "You saw it too, right? The wolf and the—"

"You're not going crazy," she said.

"Well somebody better start explaining what's going on because where I come from wolves don't talk!" I said.

Madeleine gestured toward the crowd. "You really don't see anything but people?" she asked.

“No!”

“Oh my God,” she stared at me in horror. “You lied to me—you didn’t read the will…”

“I read—part of it…” I said.

“No you didn’t!” she said. “If you had read it you would have taken the vow…”

“Alright, I didn’t read it,” I said. “Now will you please tell me what—”

Madeleine started pacing back and forth, her hands covering her face. She was freaking out.

“You didn’t read the will,” she said. “That means you didn’t take the vow, which means you have no powers…oh my God…”

I grabbed her by the shoulders to stop her pacing.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Calm down and tell me what you’re talking about.”

“The Grimm Curse,” Madeleine said. “It’s all explained in the will…”

“WHAT’S explained?” I said.

“The birthplace of the last living Grimm descendent is where the Otherworld comes to life…”

“The Otherworld?”

“The beings from the fairy tales—the Grimm fairy tales. They’re all *here.”*

I stared at her, totally confused, unable to get my mind around what she was saying.

“Witches, big bad wolves, the whole deal.” she said. “You should be able to look out at this crowd and tell me who’s a wolf in human form, or an ogre, or a witch…like Eustace could.”

“Wait,” I said. “Slow down and explain—”

“We *can’t* slow down,” she said, panic rising in her eyes. “You were supposed to take the Vow of Initiation *before* we scattered the ashes, so you could receive the powers of the Huntsman…” she

started pacing again. “Oh, God…a powerless Huntsman! What are we gonna do?”

“Madeleine!” a woman’s voice came from behind us. It was the nurse I had seen at the crime scene in front of the school. She walked up to Madeleine and me.

“What’s wrong? You look like death,” the woman said.

“Nothing, mom.” Madeleine said, turning away from her.

“Come here,” the woman took Madeleine’s arm and started to lead her away, then she stopped and looked at me. “You, too. Come on.”

The woman—apparently Madeleine’s mom—led us to an ambulance parked beside a sheriff’s patrol car at the edge of the crowded square. She made Madeleine and me sit on the tailgate of the ambulance and wrapped a blood pressure cuff around Madeleine’s arm.

“Mr. Smith told me that you’re Jacob,” Madeleine’s mom said to me as she pumped up the blood pressure cuff. “Eustace’s nephew.”

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m Jenna,” she said. “I’m Madeleine’s mom.” She looked at the dial on the cuff. “Good lord, Maddie, your pressure’s through the roof. What happened?”

“Nothing, mom,” Madeleine said again, in a distracted way.

“Don’t give me that,” Jenna said, the stripped off the cuff and looked at me. “Hold out your arm,” she said to me. “You look even worse than her. Why are you shaking?”

As she pumped up the cuff on my arm, Madeleine looked at me and shook her head—which I took as a signal that I should keep my mouth shut. She didn’t have to bother. I wasn’t about to tell this woman—a paramedic—that I had just seen a talking wolf. For all I knew she would have me checked me into a nut house right then and there.

“I’m just…cold,” I said.

Jenna pulled the cuff off of my arm and climbed up into the back of the ambulance to get a blanket. Madeleine leaned close to me and whispered.

“Don’t tell her anything,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” I whispered back.

Jenna came back with two blankets and draped one over me and the other over Madeleine.

“We’re just…upset about the Peytons,” Madeleine said to her mom.

“We all are,” Jenna said. She stroked her daughter’s hair. “Just take slow, deep breaths and try to calm down—both of you,” she looked at me. “When was the last time you had something to eat?”

“Um…” I tried to remember, but couldn’t.

“You two stay right here, I’ll get you something,” Jenna said, then headed off, into the crowd.

“You were supposed to take over for Eustace,” Madeleine said to me in a quiet voice. “To be the new Huntsman.”

“What does that mean?” I said.

“You’d know if you had read the will like you were supposed to,” she said, glaring at me.

“Alright!” I said. “I didn’t read it. Tell me.”

“The Huntsman is the one who keeps all of the Otherworld creatures from doing all of the things they do—like eat children,” Madeleine said. “All of the terrible things from the fairy tales, they’re all real. Rapunzel’s prince blinded, Snow White in a coma… The Huntsman’s like a kind of gamekeeper, keeping all of the Otherworlders from doing what they’ve done for centuries.”

“But those are fairy tales,” I said. “They aren’t real.”

“Hello??” Madeleine said. “You just saw the wolf. Did you forget already? Are you irresponsible AND stupid?”

I was about to answer when two high school kids, a guy and a girl, came up to us.

“Are you okay, Maddie?” the girl said.

“Yeah,” Madeleine said. The girl looked at me. “This is Jacob,” Madeleine said.

“Hi, I’m Kara,” the girl said. She was short, with close-cropped blonde hair, wearing a cheerleader outfit with an oversized letterman’s jacket over her shoulders. I guessed that the jacket belonged to the guy she was with. He had longish hair and no coat, and he was holding Kara tightly around the waist.

“I’m Rick,” he said.

“Hey,” I said.

Kara gave Madeleine a hug.

“I’m freaked out, too,” Kara said. “I heard they found a body.”

“It wasn’t a body,” Madeleine said. “It was just…some bones. Could be an animal, they’re not sure.”

“I heard they found Greg Peyton’s body, right in front of the school…” Rick said, but he was interrupted by Jenna, who had returned with two brownies in paper napkins and two cups of hot cocoa.

“Rick,” Jenna said sharply. “That’s enough of that. Why don’t you and Kara go get something to eat. Go on.”

“See ya later,” Kara said to Madeleine and me, then she walked off with Rick, their arms around each other.

“Eat,” Jenna said to Madeleine and me, as she handed us the brownies and the cocoa. I took a sip of the warm cocoa and felt a little better. Then I took a bite of the brownie, which was the best brownie I’d ever tasted. I scarfed it down in three big bites.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rachel Has Her Cake And Eats It Too

Rachel watched from the back of the Range Rover as the boy ate the brownie. She could see him clearly, across the crowd, but he couldn't see her. She couldn't risk him spotting her, so she stayed at the back of the Range Rover, with the rear door open, handing out her brownies to the kids at the vigil. She was wearing a heavy parka, which hid her swelling belly, and she had tucked what was left of her brittle, graying hair under a bright stocking cap. She felt something slithering out from under the cap—a tiny yellow worm-like thing was slithering out, but she shoved it back under the cap, and pulled a bandana from the pocket of her parka and tied it tightly to keep any others from slipping out.

Rachel knew who the boy was now, she was certain of it. He was a Grimm, there was no doubt at all in her mind. She could sense the hatefulness and fear from all the way across the crowded square. She sensed no power from him, though. With any luck, he was not yet the new Huntsman. But he was with that wretched little Madeleine, Eustace's dirtgirl apprentice, and Rachel had to assume the boy would be initiated very soon.

Despite the fact that she felt no power from the boy, Rachel stayed out of the boy's sight, just to play it safe. Rachel had survived for hundreds of years by always playing it safe. She didn't think the boy would recognize her in human form, but she couldn't take any chances. She had stayed alive by being extra cautious, extra vigilant, and she wasn't about to start making stupid mistakes now…not when she was on the brink of victory. She had avoided all contact with Eustace while in human form. He had never laid eyes on her as Rachel Eaton; he had only seen her twice, both times in

her true form—the first time was when he murdered her two friends, and the last time, when she gleefully watched him die.

Rachel was more clever than her two friends had been—they had underestimated Eustace's strength and stupidly shown themselves to him in human form. Eustace was young and strong then, and he followed them back to their meeting place and murdered them. After that, Rachel took every precaution—she hadn't feasted, and she had taken on the ways of the dirtfolk. It was painful and indescribably frustrating, but yoga helped. The concepts of self-restraint and the elimination of desire tamed her hunger—a bit—and she even came to appreciate her emaciated human form, the way a prisoner comes to make his wretched cell his home. She developed the quality of patience, which was hateful to a Gorgon, but she was able to cultivate it because she knew it would keep her alive, long past the brief life of any dirtfolk—even Eustace, who had been the strongest, cleverest, most skillful and enduring Huntsman she had ever encountered.

Such is not the case with this young clod, *she thought as she looked at the Grimm boy. He was a skinny, frightened, confused bit of clay, and—best of all—uninitiated and therefore powerless. And here she was, with her special brownies…she could scarcely believe her luck! She could STOP the whole damned curse of this family forever, right here, right now…*

But it hadn't worked out that way. Madeleine's mother Jenna had refused the brownies with the glowing sprite-green frosting, choosing the white-frosted brownies instead. Rachel held her tongue. Don't press it…there will be another chance. So she stood behind the Range Rover and watched the boy eat the harmless white-frosted brownie, biding her time, biding her time…

But the hunger.

Desperate, ravenous, needful; eating her from the inside out, until she thought she might cry out in frustration and fury. She

scanned the crowd, and her eyes eventually found Rick and Kara. She knew Kara from yoga class—a young cheerleader with fine, full haunches and a smooth silky coat of hair…a well-marbled young calf.

Rachel picked up the tray of sprite-green brownies and approached Rick and Kara as they passed near the Range Rover.

"Here, you two," Rachel said, forcing a sweet, consoling tone as she held out the tray to them. "Comfort food."

Rick looked at the brownies, their frosting glowing green in the darkness.

"Cool," Rick said, and picked one up and took a bite. "How'd you make 'em glow like that?"

"Magic," Rachel winked at him, and tried to contain her glee as he ate the whole thing. She picked up another brownie with a paper napkin and handed it to Kara.

"No thanks, Miss Eaton," Kara said, eyeing the sweet. "I'll just have to work it off in yoga class Saturday."

"No worries," Rachel said. "These are totally macrobiotic. No sugar, no carbs. They actually burn calories."

"Really?" Kara said. "How do they do that?"

"It's a secret," Rachel gave her a coy grin. "Old family recipe. Eat one of these and I guarantee you'll be dropping pounds before you know it, hon."

Rachel watched, containing her glee, as Kara took the green-frosted brownie and sunk her dull little dirt-teeth into it.

Bingo, *Rachel thought.*

"Thanks," Kara said, as she and Rick walked off.

"Enjoy!" Rachel said, and almost immediately, a plan burst, full-blown, in her mind.

She could have her cake and eat it too, and she could make it all happen in the next 24 earthly hours. One…single…full spin of this wretched dirtball of a world…

She slid the brownies back into the Range Rover and slammed the door. She had to hurry. The brownies would take effect within the hour and, with any luck, she could have the chubby little calf and her boyfriend in the well shortly after that.

But far better—if she hurried—she could have the Grimm boy and the dirtgirl Madeleine as well—and she could have them tonight. And then the whole thing would be over…the Grimm curse would be gone forever. Centuries of suffering and restraint would finally come to an end, just as the Otherworld had dreamed of for a long, long time.

IF *a lot of things broke her way…*if *she hurried…*if *she was careful…*if *you can keep your head while all those about you are losing theirs…*

She chuckled at her little joke, then climbed in behind the wheel and started the Range Rover and pulled out, her mind racing, planning...

If, if, if.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

I Learn About The Dirtfolk And How My Father Died

I had barely finished the brownie when Madeleine slid off the tailgate of the ambulance and said, “Come on, we have to go.”

“Where?”

“To Eustace’s house. We have to look in the will for some kind of a way to perform the Initiation. There’s got to be a way.”

I followed her across the street, leaving the square, passing in front of the old library.

“Even if we can’t perform the Initiation properly, there *has* to be a way—Eustace would have left enough information somewhere, somehow,” she said. “We have to try, or more kids will get…”

She stopped herself, as if she didn’t want to say it out loud.

“The twins—the Peytons,” I said. “What exactly happened to them?”

“They were eaten,” she said.

It wasn’t just *what* she said, it was the *way* she said it. “*They were eaten.*” Just like that. Like she was telling me what time it was, or what day it was, or what the weather was like.

“By what?” I said.

“That’s what we have to find out,” she said. “There are dozens of creatures that eat children. Could be a wolf, a witch, an ogre… there’s no way of knowing what did the actual eating without…”

“Without what?” I said.

“Without a Huntsman,” she said, with bitterness in her voice. “Eustace would have known, but you’re not Eustace, you’re… useless.”

I stopped. “You know what?” I said, angrily. “If I’m so useless and irresponsible and stupid, what do you need me for? In case you

haven’t noticed, I’ve had kind of a *WEIRD DAY*, and I’m hungry and tired and freaked out and I’m getting tired of you insulting me all the time!”

Madeleine’s eyes flashed with anger, but she stopped, took a deep breath, and spoke calmly to me.

“I need you—WE need you—this whole town needs you because you’re the last living descendant of the Grimm family,” she said. “Please come with me and I’ll explain as much as I can to you before we get to the house. It’s all in the will, but you haven’t —”

“I haven’t read the will, I know,” I said. “You’ve mentioned that several times and we both know it. Just give me the basics for now and I’ll read it when we get there.”

Madeleine turned a corner and kept walking. I walked beside her as she began talking, forcing herself to stay calm and speak softly.

“Your ancestors, the Brothers Grimm, were cursed by a gypsy,” she said. “The stories about the Otherworld—what we know as the Grimm fairy tales—were never supposed to be known by the dirtfolk…”

“Who are the ‘dirtfolk’,” I asked.

“Us,” she said. “You, me…humans. That’s what the Otherworlders call us. Man was formed from the dust of the ground —ashes to ashes, dust to dust—so the Otherworld calls us dirtfolk.”

“Who or what created *them*?” I asked.

“No one really knows,” Madeleine said. “Eustace had his theories, but all we know is that they are not of this earth. One of the early Huntsman thought that they were angels who collaborated with Lucifer when he fell from grace, but later Huntsmen disagreed. Eustace was working on it…he was hoping to end the curse before he…” her voice caught in her throat, and she stopped

talking for a moment. “Before he died,” she said. “But it didn’t work out that way.”

We turned a corner and Madeleine headed across a vacant lot. We had been taking the same path to the Grimm house that I had taken alone, but Madeleine apparently knew a short cut.

“Once the fairy tales were published, the Grimm brothers became rich and famous, and people started looking out for the witches and ogres and the rest of the creatures that were all around them,” Madeleine continued. “This made the Otherworld furious, so they forced a gypsy to curse your entire family. They gave every generation of Grimms the ability to see the creatures for what they were, but they didn’t have the power to stop them until one of the witches made a deal with a Huntsman. In exchange for her life, the witch gave the last living Grimm descendent certain powers and secret bits of information to fight back. All of it was recorded in the will, which has been passed down from every generation of your family. That’s why the will is so important. *That’s* why I’m making such a big deal out of it.”

We came out at the other end of the vacant lot, and I recognized the entrance to Wroughtwood Place. We headed down the dark, rough road, until the Grimm house—my house now—came into view. Madeleine hurried toward the house, ahead of me.

“Your ancestors have made terrible sacrifices to protect and preserve the will,” she said, as we reached the iron gate and headed up the broken brick walk to the dark house. Then she dug in her pocket and took out a key and opened the door. She turned and looked at me before we entered the house.

“A lot of your ancestors died protecting the will,” she said. “Including your father.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Rick And Kara Fall Under The Spell

"Life is so unpredictable," Rick said, tucking Kara under his arm as he steered his truck away from the vigil. "You never know what can happen."

"Yeah," Kara said sadly, staring at a passing flyer, nailed to a tree, with the Peyton twins' pictures. Beth Peyton had been in music class with Kara, and they had been friends for a while when they were younger. Well, not *friends,* but they had shared an interest in the same music for a while, and traded songs with each other, and they had gone to a concert together in Medford once. But Kara was a year older, and when she started hanging out with Rick, she and Beth Peyton had drifted apart. Rick was sixteen, and the star running back on the Woodland High football team. This gave Kara special status—a boyfriend who played football *and* had his own truck.

"Makes you want to, y'know, make the most of what you've got while you're here," Rick said, and held Kara a little closer.

"Yeah," Kara said again, then noticed Rick had passed the turn for her house. "You missed the turn," she said.

"I was thinking maybe we could go somewhere, get away from all this for a little while…just us," Rick said, and leaned over to nuzzle Kara's neck briefly.

Kara knew what Rick meant, and she knew where he was heading: to the woods; to the special spot where they had gone a couple of times before. On their second trip into the woods, things had gotten a little too heated between the two of them and Kara had become uncomfortable. Kara liked Rick, she just wasn't sure if she

liked him like *that*. But he *was* on the football team and he *did* have his own truck, so she had come up with the perfect solution.

Kara entwined her fingers with Rick's, and held up their hands as they rode in the truck. On their wrists were matching bracelets with the words "TRUE LOVE WAITS" printed on them. After their second trip to the woods, Kara had insisted that they save themselves for marriage.

"We made a pledge," Kara said. "Remember?"

Rick looked at her and, after a moment, he nodded. Of course he remembered making the abstinence pledge, but at that moment he regretted it like hell.

Kara yawned.

"I'm so *sleepy* all of a sudden," Kara said, and leaned her head back against Rick's arm and closed her eyes. In an instant, she was fast asleep.

Rick was suddenly feeling sleepy as well. He yawned, and before he could stop the truck, he fell asleep too, his head tilting against Kara's head beside him. The truck coasted off the road and bumped into a tree and came to a stop.

A moment later, headlights appeared in the rear window of the truck, and Rachel's Range Rover pulled up behind them and stopped. Neither Rick nor Kara saw Rachel's misshapen silhouette approach them, backlit against the Range Rover's headlights. And neither of them stirred, a moment later, when Rachel's hand smashed out the glass in Rick's window.

Rachel reached down and opened Rick's door. Then Rachel's hand—and her entire arm, all the way up to her shoulder—became a thick, dark green snake, which curled around Rick's body and pulled him out of the truck with immense strength. Rachel held Rick tightly with one of her snake-arms, then reached in with her other arm—now also a thick green snake—and hauled Kara from the cab of the truck as well.

Rachel smiled as she easily held the two teens aloft with her mighty snake-arms. Three small snakes hissed and poked their heads out from under her bandana, and Rachel hissed back, her tongue forked, then she turned and walked back to the Range Rover and dumped Rick and Kara into the back.

Sleep, Rachel thought. *When you wake, you'll feast. And soon, so will I.*

Rachel slammed the back door of the Range Rover, then got behind the wheel. Her hands had returned to normal, although they were gray-green and covered with festering warts.

Rachel started the Range Rover and sped off, toward home. She would dump these two in the well and, while they slept off the sprite-green brownies, Rachel had one last little task to perform before she could truly feast in peace, and all hell would break loose in the town of Woodland.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Gorgon Comes To Kill Me

Madeleine and I spent several minutes hunched over the will on the big dining room table, me with the mirror in my hand, trying to read in the dim light of an old electric lamp we found in the parlor.

“You’ll never get anywhere like that,” Madeleine said, and she took the mirror from me and put it on the table. “You have to learn to read without the mirror.”

“It’s backwards,” I said. “I’m used to reading *regular.”*

“You can do it without a mirror,” she said. “Look past the words, look into the meaning. Read that first sentence.”

“I, Eustace…” I began.

“No,” she said. “Past that. Read this part. Don’t look at the letters, or even the words, look at the sentences. Look for the *meaning*,” she said.

I looked. And after a few moments, I began to read. It was like stepping back a few feet to look at a painting—the letters became words and the words slowly became sentences and I was slowly beginning to learn to read backwards.

As I did, Madeleine hurried into the parlor and began measuring the jaws on the wall with a small ruler, then comparing them with the pics she had shot with her phone—pictures of her mother’s hands, measuring the bite marks on the bones.

“A Gorgon,” Madeleine murmured, after several minutes of measuring the jaws and examining the pictures.

“A what?” I said

“That can’t be,” she said to herself. “Eustace said there were no Gorgons in Woodland. He killed both of them.”

“He killed *who*?” I said.

Madeleine came over to me.

“Years ago, before you and I were born, he killed two Gorgons,” she said. “He said there were no Gorgons left now, but the bite marks match the Gorgon jaw molds on the wall.”

“Those jaws on the wall are…” I said.

“Jaw molds Eustace made of the Otherworlders,” she said, as she flipped through the will. “There’s an index…in the back.”

She found the index, the final section of the will, on page 1466. She scanned down the listings until she found the word ‘Gorgon.’

Then she flipped to a section of the will entitled *The Forms And Feeding Habits Of The Gorgon.*

“What is a Gorgon, exactly?” I said.

“A witch,” she said. “A child-eater, specifically.”

“A witch who eats children,” I said. “Hansel and Gretel.”

Madeleine nodded, her eyes darting over the section on the Gorgon. She read quickly, expertly. I wondered for a minute how much she had learned from my great uncle. How much time had she spent dealing with him, learning about all of this—this world within a world? For a second I felt a flash of anger—anger that my great uncle had not decided to show me such attention and care. *Why?* And my parents? Madeleine had said my father died protecting the will, but what about my mother?

I opened my mouth to ask about my father, about both my parents and Eustace and my family—but then Madeleine turned the page and there, taking up the entire next page, was an illustration that sent a shiver through me. The heading above the illustration read *Woodcut Of Mature Gorgon In True Aspect.*

The picture was an elaborate print, from an old woodcut, of a horrifying-looking witch—but I’m not talking about pointy hats and broomsticks. This creature had a female form, although it was immensely…well, FAT, for one thing. Instead of hair it had dozens—maybe hundreds—of snakes sprouting out from its head. Dozens

of other snakes were slithering around its body—where THEY came from I didn't want to know. The Gorgon's jaws were open, showing two sets of long, sharp, powerful-looking teeth—just like the jaw molds Madeleine had been studying on the wall. One of the Gorgon's arms looked human, but skinny and frail, like the little arms on a giant T-Rex; but the other "arm" was a long, thick snake, with its jaws wide open. The eyes of the Gorgon were narrow slits, like the vertical slits of a snake's pupils.

On the opposite page was a smaller picture, titled *The Gorgon In Human Form.* The picture showed a pretty young woman with long, flowing hair and a sweet, innocent face. Madeleine saw me staring at the picture of the young woman.

"That's how the Gorgon appears when she's taken human form," Madeleine said. "The opposite of her real form. They can live for years like that, as long as they don't…feed. She must have kept from feeding for a long time, which means she's starving and…"

"And?" I said.

"And she's due for a binge," Madeleine said, reading the next page, her eyes darting back and forth, over the backwards text. She murmured passages of it as she read.

"There are only two weapons with which to fight the Gorgon," Madeleine read. "The first is the Gorgon's own reflection…a mere glance into a mirror will boil the eyes of the witch…even flashing the mirror up to capture its reflection will burn its flesh…"

I was trying to keep up with Madeleine's reading, but gave up and listened to her as she read on.

"The second weapon is fire, and fire is the only way to destroy the Gorgon entirely…it must burn until every particle of flesh has become one with the air, and all that remains is ash. The ash must be disposed of properly…see section 188b…"

Madeleine thumbed back to the index and I stood up, rubbing my head, which was hurting; I realized it had been hurting—*pounding*—for a long time. I was moving into the second stage of what I can only call TOTALLY FREAKING OUT. I had stopped shaking, but my head was throbbing and spinning like a top. I stared out through the window of the dining room, into the thick trees at the edge of the forest, the moonlight casting shadows of the tall trees across the weed-choked lawn.

Madeleine continued flipping through the pages of the will, murmuring to herself.

"The mirror…" she said. "I was wondering why there was a mirror here…Eustace didn't need it to read or write…the Gorgon must have come *here…"* She found what she was looking for and began to read to herself.

I looked over her shoulder for a moment, at the will, and then turned back to the window, my mind racing with a jumble of confused thoughts as I stared at the dark woods outside.

Eustace had died four days ago, the lawyer Smith had said. That meant he died the day I left Van Nuys. I thought of the old homeless guy and the strange voice I had heard in my head. *Come home, Jacob.* I suddenly realized that those words were spoken by Eustace, possibly right at this very table, on that very morning, at that very moment…

Had Eustace really come face to face with this…thing? This *Gorgon?* Right here?

Something outside caught my eye. A tiny light blinked—no, *two* tiny lights. I strained to peer into the dark woods and saw nothing at first, but then I noticed some of the brush rustling, and some low branches moving.

There it was again. Blink. Two yellow-green…*eyes.*

Blink. They were moving…moving toward the house…

"Madeleine," I said.

She ignored me, reading on through the will on the table.

Blink. *Coming closer.*

"Madeleine," I said, louder.

"Just a minute," she said.

Then, just as I was about to turn and grab Madeleine and pull her to the window, a small tree snapped right in half at the edge of the woods and a giant snake came slithering out of the woods toward the house, FAST. It wasn't so much *slithering* as *shooting* out from the woods, like it had been fired from a gun—shooting straight at me, crossing the weeds of the lawn in less than a second, and then, SMASH! The snake burst right through the window I was looking through—

I turned, but it was too late—the snake had crossed the lawn so fast I had barely had time to move—and the giant, slimy thing whipped around my neck and tightened, hard.

I heard Madeleine shriek a short, sharp scream, and I saw her leap up from the table. Then the head of the snake rose up in front of me, right in my face—the head was massive, as big as my own—its yellow-green eyes blinked once at me and it opened its jaws with a horrible hiss, revealing long, sharp, dripping fangs, and then it reared back to strike…

It all happened so fast that I only had time to close my eyes as I tried to turn, tried to pull the thing off me, just as the snake lunged at my face and I prepared myself to feel its long fangs to sink into me—

WHAM! Madeleine rose up behind the snake and smashed its head with the base of the heavy old lamp from the table. The snake was stunned for a moment, and its coils loosened a little around my neck and I was able to take one breath before the snake came to its senses.

CRASH! A second, identical snake burst through the window next to me and shot across the room and wrapped its thick body

around Madeleine's waist and pulled her toward the window. She grabbed the leg of the heavy dining room table and the snake dragged her AND the table across the dining room, toward the windows, and slammed to a stop with Madeline holding on to the table leg tightly.

The coils tightened around my neck again and I couldn't move or breathe. I looked down, at the dining room table, which was bumping against the window frame next to me. *The dagger.* I reached down for the ornate dagger I had used to cut the seal on the will. It was just out of reach. The coils tightened and I began to see spots as I felt my eyes bulge, like they were about to pop right out of my head.

Wham! Wham! The snake holding Madeleine pulled harder on her, slamming the dining room table against the window frame again, and the dagger slid closer to me. I snatched it up and stuck it, with all of the strength I could muster, into the snake's scaly skin, near the head. The knife blade barely went in—like the snake was made of some kind of thick boot leather. Then the snake opened its jaws and reared back to bite me in the face and I suddenly jammed the dagger into its open mouth, with the tip of the blade pointed up. The snake bit down and the tip of the dagger blade sunk into the roof of its mouth.

The snake went wild, whipping around, and I heard the most horrible SCREECH—but it didn't come from the snake—it came from *behind me, outside the window.*

I tried to turn and look behind me, outside, but the coils were still too tight around my neck. The other snake was flailing around wildly as well, whipping around the room with Madeleine firmly in its coils, sending her slamming and banging around the legs of the table.

It was then I smelled the foulest stench you could ever imagine, and I heard a gurgling, hissing, *breathing* sound, right behind me,

from outside. I gagged from the smell, already choking from the strangling coils. It was like an open sewer had just spilled into the room. If I could have breathed I know I would have puked right there. But I couldn't breathe, and I began to feel like I was going to pass out.

I felt hot, damp, putrid breath on the back of my neck, and the breathing sound behind me became louder. And then came the voice:

"Nice try, young clod," the thing said. *"But you don't have the strength of a real Huntsman, do you?"*

The coils tightened even more, and the room got dimmer and I knew I would be dead in a matter of seconds. I struggled and fought like hell, I can tell you, but the *thing* holding me was way stronger than you could believe. I didn't have time to think—it had all happened so fast—and it was like my mind had gone totally blank from sheer terror.

"Oooh, this is going to be even more fun than when I killed your uncle Eustace," the thing breathed on me. I felt something slimy on the back of my neck—its *mouth?*

"I can't believe it…the last Grimm. No more Huntsmen. I am going to get sooo FAT!" the thing began to laugh its horrible laugh, right in my ear.

Just then, as Madeleine was whipped around under the table, I noticed her grab the hand mirror on one of her banging, scuttling slides along the floor. She held on to the table leg with one hand, and with the other, she raised the mirror.

And then I saw it—the thing that was behind me, holding me, breathing down my neck—I saw it, reflected in the mirror.

The Gorgon.

I only saw its image in the mirror for an instant, in the darkness—the lamp having been smashed when Madeleine hit the snake—but what I saw was WAY worse than the picture in the will—

—Glowing green snake-eyes, jaws hanging open and dripping with some kind of slime, and snakes everywhere—whipping around its head, *growing* out of its head, each little snake hissing, in a chorus of hisses which were instantly drowned out when the Gorgon saw its reflection and its eyes began to boil.

I will never forget the sound that the thing made as its eyes boiled, smoke spewing out from the two sockets in its head, but for the life of me, I can't really describe it. It was low and loud enough to rattle the walls of the house, but high and piercing enough to make you feel like your ears were about to split open.

Instantly, Madeleine and I were released, and the snakes slipped back out through the windows as fast as they had burst in. I stumbled to the floor, gasping for air, and by the time I looked up over the window sill, the Gorgon was gone.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Aftermath

I don’t know how long I crouched at the window, staring out into the dark woods. Probably only a few seconds, even though it felt like time had just completely STOPPED—except my heart wouldn’t slow down and I was still seeing spots in front of my eyes. I realized my neck was hurting terribly and my throat was so swollen that I was having trouble breathing. I tried to calm down and think clearly and take slow, deep breaths, and then I heard a small, soft moan from under the table.

Madeleine was passed out on the floor. There was blood on her temple. I crawled over to her and said her name over and over but she didn’t wake up. I got up and went to the kitchen and turned on the tap. Rusty water spit from the faucet while I looked around and found a bowl and a towel and I filled the bowl with water and brought the bowl and the towel over to Madeleine and gently dabbed her face with the cold water. After what seemed like forever, she slowly opened her eyes and stared at me.

“Madeleine?” I said, and dabbed the cut on her temple with the towel. She jerked away—the cut was pretty deep and she was in pain and for a few seconds it seemed like she didn’t know who I was.

“It’s me, Jake,” I said. “Can you—?”

She sat up suddenly, as her senses seemed to come back to her, and before I could say anything more she was back up at the table, looking through the will. She didn’t say a word—she just went into action.

“That was…that was it—that thing—it was…” I tried to talk, but I couldn’t seem to catch my breath, so I could only manage a word or two at a time.

“The Gorgon,” she said, in her calm, flat voice, as she looked through the will.

I couldn’t believe she could act so calm after what had just happened. She seemed to slip into some kind of very strict way of focusing on the problem, and not on her feelings—like a doctor who treats people in the ER with horrible injuries. No emotion, just action. I guessed that she got part of this from her mother, the EMT, who had to deal with emergencies all the time…but her mother never had to deal with a Gorgon, that much I could also guess. It was definitely weird to see someone so calm after what had happened, but it was also kind of comforting. I decided to try and be like her, if I could. What the hell else is a kid supposed to do when a vicious, child-eating snake-woman attacks you and tries to kill you? It was like I had a choice: I could try and calm down or I could stay freaked out—but if I stayed freaked out I would useless, just like Madeleine had said before.

“She knows who you are, and she knows you’re uninitiated,” Madeleine continued, talking as she read. “We have to find her. If she’s bold enough to attack you—and me—then she knows she can attack anyone, anytime, and she will. If she hasn’t already.”

“Where’s your phone?” I said, and began looking around for it.

“Forget the phone,” Madeleine said. “WE have to find her, and find her right away.”

“We?” I said. “What can we do? We need help—we need—”

“YOU need to calm down,” Madeleine said. “There’s no time to be afraid, and there’s no one else who can help us. The Otherworlders feed off of human fear, and if we cause a panic it will only make them stronger. You have to push your fear aside and work with me, do you understand?”

“But if she looks like *that* other people will see her and—” I said.

“She WON’T look like that,” Madeleine snapped. “Pay attention. She’ll take human form—like the other picture you saw.”

It hurt like hell to talk, and I was still having trouble breathing, so I went back to the kitchen and drank from the faucet in small, slow sips. I ducked my head under the cold water and it helped a little. As I dried my hair with a towel, Madeleine read quickly through the will—the section about the Gorgon.

“She’ll look like the opposite of what she really is,” Madeleine said. “She’ll be pretty and young and thin…but she’s bold enough now to start binging. She’ll find two more victims and start to feast, and she won’t wait. Gorgons are impatient…very impatient, especially once they start binging after a long period of fasting.”

Madeleine continued to read out loud: “The Gorgon lures her victims with food…victims are always children—or teens—so she will probably be around young people…a teacher, a coach, or a counselor. She’ll be single, she’ll live in the woods, or as close to them as she can get. She’ll live alone, with no children of her own. If Gorgons mate at all they eat their young…”

I came over to her and looked down at the picture of the Gorgon in human form—a thin, pretty young woman with long hair.

Madeleine’s phone chimed, from across the room. She ran to it and answered. She listened for a moment.

“It’s okay, mom,” Madeleine said. “We’re okay. We’re at Eustace’s—at the house. Okay, I will. I’ll tell him.”

Then Madeleine grew very still, and her eyes grew very wide. When she spoke again, her voice was tight with fear. It was the first time I had hear her sound really afraid.

“Okay,” she said to her mom. “Okay, we’ll be home soon. *Okay*, Mom. I promise. I love you, too. See you in a little bit.”

Madeleine hung up and looked at me.

“Rick and Kara never made it home from the vigil,” she said, her voice still tight and strained. “They found Rick’s truck, smashed against a tree. There was no sign of Rick or Kara anywhere.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

In The Well Of The Witch

Kara woke up first. Her face was against something wet and gritty, and it hurt her cheek. Her clothes felt wet; she was lying on a cold, damp floor, and she was shivering. She couldn't see anything at first, but she felt Rick's warm body close to her. She crawled over next to him and whispered his name, but he didn't move.

There was a sound, above her, a creaking, mechanical sound. Kara looked up: she could see, dimly, above her, the circular opening of the mouth of the well. Firelight was flickering around the ceiling above the well, and silhouetted against the firelight was a figure of a monster—a lump of a woman, with writhing hair…

The creaking thing was some kind of contraption of ropes and pulleys, which were lowering a large platter of something down to the floor of the well. The platter came to rest beside Kara and she smelled food—a mound of delicious, piping hot food. The sound of the platter thumping on the floor of the well made Rick stir, and then he woke when he smelled the food. He pressed close to Kara and looked up at the Thing at the mouth of the well. Neither of them had any idea where they were or what was happening, but they were cold and wet and terrified…and hungry.

"Eat," the Thing above them said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Eustace's Computer

Madeleine finished reading the section on the Gorgon and then quickly snapped photos of each page with her phone. As she photographed the last page, she saw something—a footnote on the bottom of the page. It read: *"For further details on the Woodland Gorgon population, consult files in the computer."*

"Eustace had a computer?" I asked. It seemed odd, especially since even the newest electrical appliances in the house were older than Madeleine and me combined.

"Upstairs, in the study," Madeleine said, already on the move. I followed her, taking two steps at a time.

"I've seen it," Madeleine said, as we headed down the long, narrow upstairs hallway. "But I never saw him use it. He didn't use email or texting or anything…nothing modern. He didn't trust it."

I followed her to the study at the end of the hall, passing rooms that gave me quick flashes of near-memories…familiar feelings, like the picture of me I had seen when I first reached the house. Were one of these rooms along the upstairs hallway my old room? Had I slept in my crib in one of these rooms as a baby? Had I run down this hallway before, as a toddler…?

I didn't have much time to think about that because we quickly reached the study—a cramped, musty, book-lined room with an old roll top desk against one wall. Madeleine took a key from her pocket and raised the roll top, revealing the most ancient desktop PC I had ever seen. It was the size of a large microwave oven, with a tiny screen. It had to be at least thirty years old. Madeleine fumbled around, looking for a switch to turn it on, but I found it

right away. I muttered something about knowing computers and we waited forever for the old machine to boot up.

Finally, the small screen flickered to life, and a tiny “C” prompt blinked slowly at the top corner of the screen. My old hacker friend Mike Wong had shown me how to work with DOS operating systems, and I entered “DIR” to access the computer’s directory. There was nothing—a basic operating system program, that was about it.

“There aren’t any files,” I said, typing away at the dusty keyboard. “No document files, anyway. He didn’t even have email or a dial-up program to go online…”

“There has to be *something*,” Madeleine said.

I tried everything I could think. I restarted the computer, read the primitive source code, scanned the hard drive…it was like an empty shell.

“There’s just…nothing,” I said.

“You’re wrong. Keep looking,” Madeleine said. “You said you knew all about computers…”

“I didn’t say I knew *all* about computers,” I said. “There’s just nothing here.”

“Eustace wouldn’t have written that footnote if there was nothing here,” Madeleine said. “He wasn’t like that. Everything he did had a purpose.”

“Well, then YOU look,” I said, feeling angry all of a sudden. “Since you’re the one who knew Eustace so well. I don’t know how his mind worked. I never even knew him. Guy sends me away, ignores me for ten years, and then leaves all this for me to figure out. He didn’t give a damn about me.”

“You’re wrong, Jake,” Madeleine said. Then she went to a shelf and pulled out a thick photo album and opened it on the desk. “All he *did* was talk about you. Look.”

I looked at the album. I stopped typing at the computer and started turning the pages of the album. I was pretty shocked, I can tell you.

There, spread before me, were pages and pages of photos of me, all through my childhood—even a bunch of pictures from Van Nuys: all of birthdays, all of my school pictures—Heather must have sent them, I suppose. My throat tightened a little, but not from the strangling I had received earlier.

"Why didn't he—why didn't he ever talk to me? Or call? Or even send a damned birthday card?" I said.

"Because he wanted to keep you away from all of this," Madeleine said. "He never intended for you to have to deal with it. He was trying to put an end to it, and he would have, if he'd had time. The only thing he did wrong was die before he could end the curse. He was trying to protect you. He *hated* being apart from you," she said, then kneeled beside me and put her hand on my arm. "He loved you, Jake."

I looked at the pictures, and my eyes started feeling hot with tears. Madeleine kept her hand on my arm, and squeezed it tightly.

"After my dad died, my mom was kind of overwhelmed, and Eustace took care of me," she said. "He used to tell me that kids who lose a parent have to grow up faster than other kids—especially an only child, like me. And you. He said he thought you would be like that—more grown up than other kids. Anyway, that's how come he made me his apprentice. He said he believed you and I would be a lot alike."

She gently took the photo album from me and put it back on the shelf. Then she came back and kneeled beside me again.

"There must be something here," she said softly. "Eustace taught me that you have to force back your feelings and *think*, Jake. Concentrate. We can talk all about Eustace later, but we don't have time to do it now."

“Think,” she said again.

I looked at the computer screen.

Think, think…

“Give me your phone,” I said. She gave it to me and I looked at the picture she had snapped of the last page. The words were too tiny to read, especially *backwards,* so I clicked on the “flip photo” icon and the picture flipped backwards—making the words on the screen appear normal.

“For further details on the Woodland Gorgon population, consult files in the computer.”

I read the sentence out loud.

And then, out of nowhere, it hit me.

I got up and yanked the power cord from the back of the computer and grabbed a letter opener from the desk and started prying open the side panel of the CPU.

“What are you doing?” Madeleine said.

“Consult files *IN* the computer,” I said.

Madeleine looked at me like I was crazy, but she didn’t say anything as I pried open the CPU.

There, inside the dusty, cobwebbed guts of the old computer was a thin manila file folder. I grabbed it and spread it out on the desk and Madeleine and I read the single page inside. The page was yellowed and curled up at the edges, and it was written in Eustace’s backwards hand. Madeleine started reading it, and, after struggling for a few seconds to read backwards, I snapped a photo of it, flipped the photo, and read from the phone:

“Below are four names of the only remaining <u>potential</u> Gorgon inhabitants of Woodland. Be advised, these women are merely persons of interest, given their general profile, i.e., their habits and appearances. To the best of my knowledge at this time, there is no evidence that they should be treated with any overt suspicion, only cautious regard, and make no assumptions. IF YOU ARE

CONSIDERING CONFRONTING ANY OF THESE WOMEN, PROCEED WITH <u>EXTREME</u> CAUTION."

I read the names out loud to Madeleine.

"Cynthia Mason?" I said.

Madeleine shook her head. "She got married and moved to Seattle a year ago," she said.

"Dorothy McFarland?" I said.

"She died in a fire…her house burned down when I was a little kid.," Madeleine said.

"Beatrice Caruthers?"

"Don't know her," Madeleine said.

"Rachel Eaton?"

"Miss Eaton?" Madeleine frowned. "She's the yoga instructor at the rec center. She's really nice…"

"What's she look like?"

"Thin, blonde, pretty…" Madeleine trailed off, looking at me. "She teaches the youth class, and has a catering company… weddings, kids' birthday parties…"

We stared at each other for a second.

Then we got up and got the hell out of there, running back down the hallway.

"I don't know where she lives," Madeleine said, as we ran down the stairs.

"I'm on it," I said, as I entered Rachel Eaton's name in a search directory on Madeleine's phone as I ran. As we reached the bottom of the stairs a caller ID appeared on the phone screen: "Jenna O'Hara."

"Your mom again," I said, holding up the phone for Madeleine to see.

"Ignore it," Madeleine said.

I waited for the call to go to voicemail, then I re-entered Rachel Eaton's name in the search engine and we waited. Finally, an

address appeared on the phone's screen.

"4142 Forest View Drive," I said.

"That's all the way on the other side of town," Madeleine said. She looked at her watch. "It's after midnight. Gorgons feed at dawn. We have to hurry."

I followed her to the door, then I stopped and turned back to the dining room. Madeleine started to say something but she stopped when she saw me pick up the hand mirror and tuck it into my waistband.

"Right," she said, with a look of approval in her eyes.

"If we find her—it," I said. "The mirror isn't enough to kill her…"

"No," Madeleine said. "Only fire can destroy a Gorgon. We'll just have to figure that out once we find her. But if she has Rick and Kara we can at least use the mirror to fend her off long enough to get them away from her."

I nodded, and pushed away the thought of fighting that horrible *thing* again…

"There's one other thing," Madeleine said, looking away awkwardly. "The Gorgon can only be killed by a virgin."

"Oh," I said, and I looked away, too. "Well, I guess I can do it."

"Me, too," said Madeleine. Our eyes met for a second, then she turned and headed out, and, once again, I followed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Into The Woods

We ran through the dark, deserted streets of Woodland for nearly an hour, across the square, past the school, through the neighborhoods surrounding the square, and then, just as we reached the road that led to Forest View Drive, Madeleine stopped.

Ahead, driving right toward us, was a small compact car. Madeleine pulled me into the brush by the side of the road.

“My mom,” she whispered, as we hunkered down in the brush. I watched as the car approached slowly. As the car passed, I could see Jenna behind the wheel, her phone at her ear. Madeleine’s phone chimed and I quickly hit the button to silence it. It was the third time Jenna had called since we left the house.

“She’ll be out looking for us all night,” Madeleine said. “And she’ll have the sheriff out looking, too. We have to stay off of the streets.” Madeleine looked around. As soon as Jenna’s car disappeared around a curve, Madeleine dashed across the road, heading for the woods.

I hesitated for a second, then followed her.

Everything in me wanted to stay OUT of those woods, but I did my best to force back the fear and I ran into the woods after her.

It was a long, scary, stumbling slog through those woods, I can tell you. Madeleine and I hardly said a word as we pushed through branches and brambles and brush. There was no trail, nothing to guide us, and the moon was hidden behind the clouds that were gathering in the night sky. At one point, Madeleine stopped.

“I’ve never been in this part of the woods. I’m not sure which way…” she said, looking around.

“Wait,” I said. Then I clicked on Google maps and targeted 4142 Forest View Drive and turned on the GPS. After a moment, a little arrow appeared, pointing us in the right direction, and we headed off, following the glowing guide in my hand.

It seemed like the woods went on forever, especially when I heard a rustling sound behind us, or saw a shadow tracking us through the dim, moonless forest. But I kept my focus on the phone’s glowing screen.

No fear…no fear…

At least a hundred times I thought of stopping, turning back, and getting the hell out of there. All of this had happened so suddenly, it seemed like a nightmare—like it wasn’t really real. It was crazy, all of it. Impossible. But the swelling pain around my throat was real; and when I looked at Madeleine I could see that the cut on her temple was real. Still, it seemed like total insanity to jump right into this crazy adventure with this pushy girl and the crazy will and…

…And yet, as we pressed on, a different kind of feeling started to come over me. It’s hard to explain, but I think it was the beginning of the feeling I was supposed to have—the power of the Huntsman. That’s what I was, right? Even though I hadn’t taken the vow, or read the whole will, I had read part of it; I had fought with the Gorgon and survived. I began to feel…stronger, I guess. I began to doubt less. At one point, when I hesitated, Madeleine had taken my hand and said, “It’s okay to *feel* fear, just *act* like you don’t, and the fear will go away.”

Fake it till you make it, I thought. I had read those words somewhere before, and believe me, I was faking it. But Madeleine was right: the more I *pretended* not to be afraid, the more the fear went away, and I felt stronger. I thought of the Peyton twins, and Rick and Kara, and for the first time in my life, I felt like there was something bigger than me, more important than me, something that

meant more than just my own survival. There were people whose lives depended on *me*—on *me* not screwing up, or being afraid, or turning back. I thought of Eustace, and my father. They must have felt afraid, too, and as I pushed on through the woods, I felt for the first time like I had someone or some*thing* to live up to. Something was expected of me. Something was changing in me, and I realized much later that, for the first time, I was beginning to feel like my father must have felt, and his father before him. All of my life I had only felt anger and disappointment and confusion when I thought of my real father. But, although I didn't know it at the time, I was becoming my father's son. I was becoming a man. I was becoming a Grimm.

Finally, we reached the end of the woods and looked out at the small cluster of houses in a hollow below. A streetlight near us flickered and then went out, and I looked up and saw that the sky was growing light. We must have been in the woods for hours, because it was nearly dawn.

Madeleine noticed it, too.

"We're out of time," she said. "Gorgons are reptilian, so they crave sunlight and warmth, and they feed at dawn."

I looked down at the phone and saw the arrow pointing in the direction of one particular house in the small group of houses. It was a big house, and it had lots of windows and large skylights, and thick, heavy smoke was bellowing from the chimney.

"That's it, isn't it?" I asked Madeleine. She nodded.

"Come on," she said, and we headed for the house.

The house was backed up against the forest, so we approached it from behind. We tried to stay out of sight, but there wasn't much to hide us as we crossed the wide, deep lawn behind the house in the early morning light. We made a mad dash for the back of the house and stood against it and listened. No sound came from inside. Madeleine took my hand and led me around the side of the

house, and then to the front. There, next to the door, was the number 4142. We hid behind a large hedge, just under the front windows.

“What do we do now?” I whispered. “We can’t just knock on the door at five o’clock in the morning. What if we’re wrong? What if this isn’t the right place?”

Madeleine bit her lip, thinking.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Slaughter Of The Calf

Kara struggled against the chains that bound her ankles and wrists behind her. She was hog-tied, dangling from the chains that hung from the ceiling of the dungeon, her head on a chopping block, her mouth tightly gagged. She glanced over at Rick, who was strung up just like her, his head on a second block, a few feet away.

The horrible thing had hauled them up with her snake-arms and strung them up with hardly a struggle, given the immense strength of the numerous snakes that were growing from the beastly witch, growing longer and stronger by the minute. The Gorgon's reptile eyes had grown back—regenerating the way some reptiles can regenerate their limbs. Kara watched the Gorgon in the firelight from the massive oven, as it sharpened an axe on a grinding wheel a few feet away.

Both Kara and Rick were out of their minds with fear, unable to think, unable to scream or move, unable to do anything but whimper in the heat from the oven, their tears mingling with the sweat pouring down their faces as they wondered *what in the name of God has happened to us?*

Then the Gorgon finished sharpening the axe and approached Kara, who looked up at the thing, terror swelling inside her until she felt she might burst from sheer, brute fear.

The Gorgon stood over Kara, then rested the axe against the chopping block and sent out a slithering little snake that plucked a hair from Kara's head.

“Ow!” Kara cried out, her voice muffled by the gag. “You BITCH!”

“Now, now,” said the thing, through its dripping jaws. *“Such an ugly word from such a pretty young thing.”* The Gorgon looked down at Kara’s TRUE LOVE WAITS bracelet. *“And an INNOCENT one at that!”* the creature hissed with laughter.

Then the Gorgon held up the axe with one strong snake-arm, and split Kara’s single, plucked, golden hair on the gleaming blade of the axe.

“Perfect,” the Gorgon purred.

And then the thing wrapped both thick snake-arms around the axe handle and raised it over her head to slaughter the foul little calf—

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Final Encounter

"Ring it," Madeleine said.

We were standing on the front porch, having decided to ring the bell.

"And what if no one answers?" I said.

"Kick the door down."

"I'm not kicking any doors down," I said.

"Ring it," she said.

I reached out my hand…and rang the doorbell.

*

The bell rang loudly in the dungeon just as the Gorgon brought the axe down with tremendous force—but the ring distracted the Gorgon, and the axe blade missed Kara's neck by an inch—just close enough to sever the gag covering Kara's mouth and scratch her cheek.

Kara SCREAMED.

*

I heard the scream and, before I could think twice, I stepped back and kicked the door as hard as I could. It burst open and I ran inside, the mirror in my hand, with Madeleine right behind me. We heard a second, louder scream, and followed the sound to a stairway leading down. We rushed down the curving stairway and I could feel tremendous heat from something below—but before we

could reach the end of the stairs, an enormous snake shot up around the curving stairs at us. I heard the slithering hiss before the snake reached us and I dodged it at the last second.

But Madeleine hadn't heard it, and the snake whipped around her and whisked her away, down the stairs, right past me, in the blink of an eye.

I charged down the stairs into what I can only describe as hell—the roaring fire, the roar of the Gorgon, the screams of Madeleine and Kara—whose head was on a chopping block, as was Rick's, nearby.

The Gorgon roared at me, holding Madeleine aloft.

I charged at the thing, holding the mirror out before me. The Gorgon caught a glimpse of itself in the mirror and its eyes began to sizzle before it turned away. It sent another giant snake-arm out at me, but I held up the mirror and the snake whipped around in pain, its flesh burning with foul smoke, bubbling blisters pushing up its leathery scales. The Gorgon roared even louder, then flung Madeleine toward the well. For a horrifying second I thought Madeleine had gone down the well, but I saw that she had grabbed the rocky rim of the well and held on with one hand as the rest of her dangled over the deep drop.

That one second when I was distracted gave the Gorgon enough time to send its other snake-arm toward me. The thick snake whipped around my hand, which was holding the mirror, and with a SNAP and a shock of PAIN my hand was crushed and the snake pulled away the mirror and flung it to the stone floor of the dungeon, where it smashed to pieces.

The Gorgon's roar turned into a kind of awful laughter and I leapt out of the way as its one remaining snake-arm shot toward me once again. I dodged it and landed near Kara and crawled behind the large chopping block, grabbing the axe on the way. The snake shot around the chopping block and grabbed my arm holding the

axe. I grabbed the axe in my other hand and, with one quick, strong blow, I severed the head off of the giant snake.

The Gorgon HOWLED and gray-green fluid squirted from the headless snake as it flailed around wildly like a loose fire hose. I stood up and chopped at the chains binding Kara, keeping one eye on the writhing, screaming Gorgon. The chains were heavy and it took several hard blows with my one good hand to finally break through them and Kara was freed.

Kara dived under the huge cutting table and I looked over and saw the Gorgon advancing slowly, cautiously toward me, backlit by the roaring fire in the enormous oven behind it. The Gorgon's snake-arms were slowly regenerating, as were the Gorgon's eyes. I began chopping at Rick's chains and, just as he was freed, the snakes had fully regenerated and they shot at me once more. I hit the floor, dodging their first attack—the Gorgon's eyes weren't fully regenerated yet, so the snakes missed me by inches. I crawled over to the well and took Madeleine's hand and tried with my one good hand to pull her up to safety when I felt both snakes whip around my ankles and yank me to the floor and I dropped Madeleine and she tumbled down into the well with a scream which ended abruptly with a horrible thump on the floor of the well below.

I reached for the axe, but the snakes began to drag me back—back toward the Gorgon, toward the oven. I looked over at Rick and Kara, who were cowering under the cutting table.

"The axe!" I shouted to them.

Rick scrambled out from under the table and grabbed the axe and swung with all his might at the snake arms that were dragging me closer to the Gorgon.

But Rick's blows bounced off of the snakes with no effect. He hacked away at them, but the blade didn't even leave a scratch.

Why the hell could I chop through them but Rick couldn't—? I thought as I was dragged helplessly past the table and within arm's length of the putrid-smelling Gorgon—

And then I remembered.

"Rick!" I shouted. "Only a virgin—only a virgin can kill it!"

Rick stared at me like I was crazy, then quickly dodged under the table and handed the axe to Kara.

Kara looked at Rick and shook her head. "I can't do it, either," she said.

For God's sake, am I the only one here who—??

I grabbed the leg of the heavy cutting table as the snakes pulled me toward the Gorgon, who stood before the blazing oven, laughing its awful roaring laugh.

"I guess true love doesn't wait after all!" the beast cackled. *"Goodbye, Grimm..."*

The snakes, having fully regenerated, were pulling me toward the Gorgon with such force that I thought I might be ripped in half. My hand holding the table leg was sweating and slippery from the snake-slime and I was losing my grip.

And so that's exactly what I did—

I let go.

I let go of the table leg and the Gorgon suddenly staggered backwards, into the door of the oven.

Howling, roaring, snakes flailing, the Gorgon had stumbled halfway into the oven and the snakes released my ankles and I jumped up—

"BURN!" I yelled at the Gorgon, in a voice I hardly recognized as my own, and I shoved the wretched, boiling, stinking monster into the blazing oven and slammed the door.

I will spare you the sights and sounds and smells of what followed. Believe me, you don't want to know.

But the Gorgon was soon gone.

All gone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I Am The Huntsman

I found Madeleine's phone and called her mom. A blur of police, ambulances, and firefighters (who pulled Madeleine up from the well) came and went. Madeleine was hurt pretty bad, but she is up and around at the hospital now, and complaining already about wanting to go home. But having your mom as your nurse is about as much fun as having your mom as your teacher.

I spent three nights in the hospital, after they reset the bones in my hand. It's getting stronger, and I am finally typing this last chapter with both hands. They tell me it will heal up fine, eventually.

I made sure I was at Madeleine's bedside when she woke up. She had an arm and a leg in traction and they were pumping all kinds of drugs into her, but I waited. And when she opened her eyes and looked at me, I said, simply, "She's gone." And Madeleine understood. Then she closed her eyes and slept for a full day.

On the next day, I brought her a copy of *The Woodland News*, which had a photograph of Rachel Eaton under the headline "SERIAL KILLER SLAIN." I read the story to Madeleine, all about how Sheriff Cord had pieced together the "evidence" to prove Rachel Eaton had killed the Peyton twins, and about how they discovered us poor, helpless kids in her dungeon. The part about how she wound up in the oven was a little vague, but Sheriff Cord assured the public that there would be an inquest, which he would gladly hold publicly for all to witness…

"And for him to get his picture in the paper," Madeleine said, as I finished reading the article.

“Kara came by yesterday,” I said. “When you were asleep. She didn’t remember anything.”

“The victims never remember,” Madeleine said. “Only the Huntsman and his apprentice.”

I took her hand.

“Thanks,” I said. “For believing in me.”

“I didn’t,” she said, with a small, sly smile. “But what choice did I have?”

We sat there for a moment like that, not saying anything. A nurse came and brought some juice and some food, and then left.

“But you did it,” Madeleine said.

“Yeah,” I smiled. “I guess I did.”

“You know this is just the beginning,” she said.

“I know,” I said.

“So you’re staying,” she said it like a statement, not a question.

“What choice do I have?” I said, and she smiled again. There was something about her smile, the way the corners of her mouth turned down, not up…something about it just kind of *got* to me. Then, just as her eyelids got heavy and she started to drift off, I leaned over and kissed her cheek.

“Welcome home, Jacob,” she murmured in my ear.

*

I finished reading the will last night. The last part I read was titled *The Provenance Of The Special Huntsman.* It read:

In the event that the last living Grimm descendent does not fully execute the Vow of Initiation, he may grow to gain full powers granted unto him as a result of actions of extreme courage and valor. Such a Huntsman may, eventually, exceed the powers of those who are Initiated. Such Huntsmen will bear a special burden, however, in that they must summon their own courage to bring

their powers to bear. Their advantage will be that they have earned their powers, rather than having them granted unto them. Their powers will therefore become their own, and they may ultimately master them to the utmost ability of the finest and strongest Huntsmen of all, but only as long as their valor, courage, and strength of character will sustain them.

I memorized this part of the will, and I will never forget it. I will defend it to my death.

*

Jenna has agreed to become my legal guardian, and I will technically be living at her house, with Madeleine, at least until I'm eighteen. But I spend most of my time at Eustace's house—my house, now. I will start school at Woodland High next week, and I am already a kind of minor celebrity. People recognize me on the street, and they treat me with kindness—and more than a little curiosity. I suspect it's always been that way for we Grimms.

When I cleaned up the house and had the windows replaced in the dining room, some workers discovered a letter that Eustace had written to me on the night of his death. I took it with me one late afternoon as the workers were cleaning up, and I sat on the steps of the bandstand at the center of the town square and read it:

My Beloved Jacob,

It breaks my heart to write you this letter, just as it broke my heart to send you away after your parents were gone. The spell that was placed on our family centuries ago is a sword with two edges: we were able to see and recognize the creatures that bedevil the birthplace of the last living Grimm descendent in each generation —in our case, Woodland.

But the other edge of the sword is that we Grimms bear the terrible, lonely responsibility of protecting the innocents around us.

My fondest hope was that I could find a way to end this curse, and that you and I could be reunited.

But I failed. And now that you know your destiny, you know the truth about your family, and you will learn more as you take up the sword your fathers carried. Trust what you feel, and your greatest fears will become your greatest strengths.

Love,

Your Uncle Eustace.

*

I sat on the bandstand steps for a long time after finishing the letter. I watched a raven fly overhead and, as it grew dark, I saw a fox dart quickly around the trunk of a tree at the edge of the square. The fox sat up and looked at me for a long moment, and I held its gaze until it disappeared into the shadows.

I had the feeling I would see him again.